

19 What style?

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Style — that perennial Question mark that distinguishes individuality and marks classes and professions apart. Without it we would live in a deady dull world, yet it bedevils us all when we have to invest \$50 000 or \$500 000 in the bricks and mortar and choose 'Our Style'!

WHAT IS ARCHITECTURAL STYLE?

Architectural style is all around in our cities and towns. It shapes our built environment and is the subliminal background of our every waking moment affecting our daily moods. Yet most of us hardly ever give it a thought, although we spend hours everyday looking at, and reacting (even if unconsciously) to the architectural style(s) of Australia.

A trip to the supermarket affects us differently to attending church. The supermarket as a building fades into the background with all attention focused on the products for sale. The church however imposes its presence with messages concerning the religion it represents.

A church or a supermarket are very different architectural styles, and they give us very different messages about the meaning and purposes of the building.

In essence, style is the method we use to give our buildings meaning so that the architectural world we live in is comprehensible. If the church was turned into a supermarket and vice-versa a lot of people would think this was, at the very least, strange. Some would believe it blasphemous, and the retailers would think it ridiculous and impractical.

It is the same with housing style. A house must look like a 'home'. To do that it must be built out of the right stylistic building blocks that say 'home' in the language which feels right to you and your family.

Housing style is very much tied up with the way in which we organise our family lifestyle, and the balance we strike between competing values such as;

- social openness versus privacy
- status versus informality
- conformity to expectations of our friends and social groups versus expression of individual taste
- desire for practicality versus concentration on aesthetic images, and so on.

All of this is governed by the rules of a stylistic language which

unfortunately our school education fails to teach us. For architectural style has its own grammar, accent and dialect as does English, German or Japanese. To understand more about residential architectural style we need to learn some rules, and something of the stylistic heritage we have inherited from past Australian generations.

THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF STYLE

To develop fluency in any language you need to learn the basic grammar. The language of style is no different except that we are dealing with geometry, volume, pattern, proportion, colour and texture rather than nouns, verbs and adjectives.

GEOMETRY

Euclidean geometry, originating over 2000 years ago, still governs architectural style today. Squares, rectangles, triangles, cubes, rectangular and triangular prisms or pyramids provide the basis of the grammatical language of residential architecture.

Rooms are made up of cubes or rectangular prisms, roofs of triangular prisms and pyramids, doors and windows of squares and rectangles, and so on. How they are combined gives you volume and pattern.

VOLUMETRIC GEOMETRY

These are simply the words to describe the effect of combining all the rooms, roof shape, underfloor space, corridors, stairs, entry, garages, decks, verandahs and entrance steps into an ordered sequence that express the 'right character', for example:

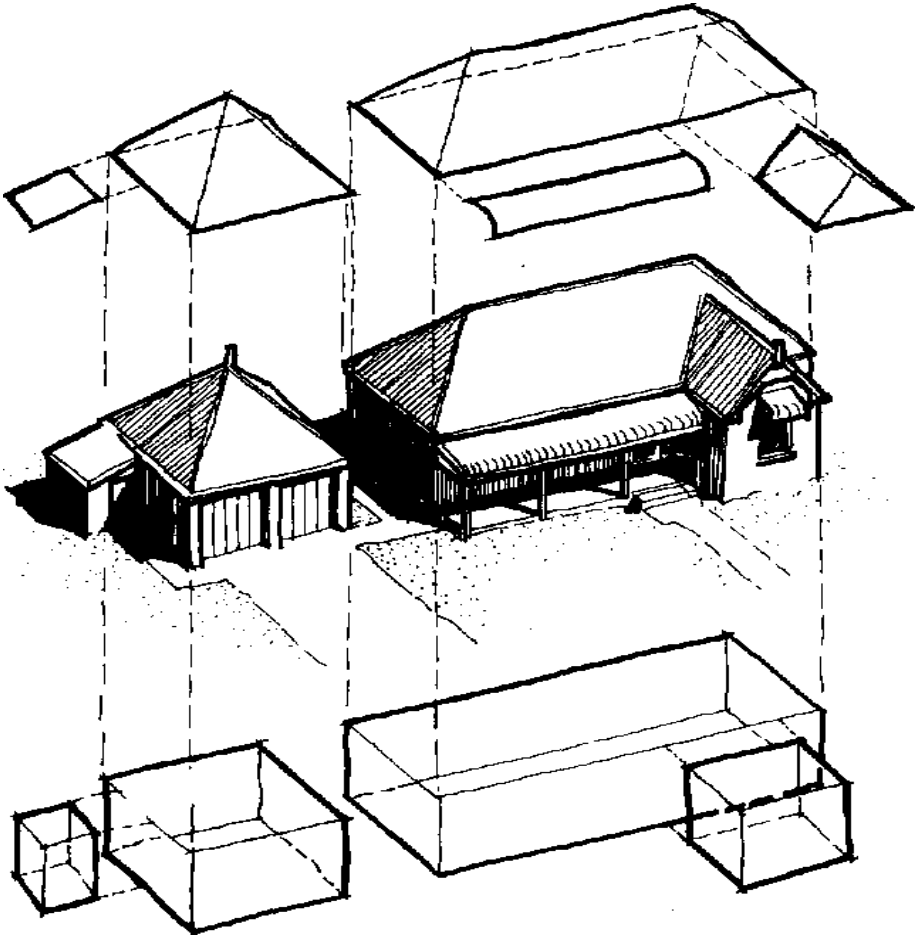
- 'big and impressive'
- 'low, open and restrained'
- 'expansive and dynamic'
- 'traditional or innovative'

Applying these different 'characters' to the same type of accommodation will result in very different planning and volumetric arrangements.

PROPORTION

Finally, it is proportion that is the economy of means that governs how well these different 'characters' come together.

Just as we all appreciate a well written newspaper article that gets to the point quickly and conveys the essential message in the fewest possible words,



it is the house which has the simplest and most elegant arrangement of rooms, roofs, verandahs, terraces, doors and windows that usually attracts our eye.

When things get complicated they also often become ugly and out of balance. We need to keep a sense of proportion so that the whole house is governed by 'good proportions'.

In Chapter 10, 'Designing your own home' (p.121), we saw how certain proportions can lend grace to windows and doors. The same applies to the way in

which volumes (rooms and roof spaces) are combined to provide the overall shape of the house.

The proportions chosen, and the patterns of windows, doors, and moulding should be consistent with the 'character of the times', and reinforce its spirit.

During Victorian times 'high class' meant being 'above the hoi polloi', and domestic styles of the wealthy tended to emphasise high and narrow windows and doors, and tall proportions. In the 1950s and today, there is more emphasis on class mobility and social openness, and our houses have more wide, open windows and horizontal proportions.

Choose the proportions of your housing style to reflect the character of your lifestyle.

COLOUR AND TEXTURE

If geometry and proportion represent the building blocks of style, colour and texture are like our feeling for the way in which we choose adjectives and verbs to give emphasis and meaning. Colour and texture give emphasis and accent to our walls, floors, ceilings and roofs.

The use of blue will make our rooms feel cool, which might be great for a sunny beach house but awful for a cold or damp environment. Rough textured boards on the walls of a room will make it feel cosy and relaxed: fine for a 'den', but not for a 'formal dining room'.

Certain colours also go with certain historic periods and certain settings. Victorian architecture tended to use burgundies, greens and creams, whereas, since the 1950s when the influence of the German Bauhaus and Scandinavian aesthetic came to Australia, white and pastel colours have predominated. In the 1990's Tuscan oranges and russets became fashionable.

We also find colour being used to harmonise with the setting, such as whites and blues for beach-side houses, and browns and greens for bushland settings.

Textures have always been a way of emphasising the shape of walls. In the 1920s and 1950s Australians seemed to like the texture of brickwork and red tile roofs, but since the 1970s smooth painted rendered walls and the rippled patterns of corrugated steel have begun to appear.

It's all a way of adding a particular feeling to the 'volumetric geometry', and 'proportion' which govern the basic grammar of architectural style. Just as when speaking you add colourful expressions and particular intonations to give emphasis, the colours and textures you choose will accent your residential style.

ECHOES OF THE PAST

Without realising it, Australians of today have grown up surrounded by a variety of housing styles. These have included the traditions of Colonial, Victorian and Federation houses.

In the middle decades of the twentieth century the 'Triple-Fronted-Red-Texture-Brick-Tile-Roof-Bungalows' of the 1940s and 1950s, and the 1960s architectural style originating in the German Bauhaus movement came to predominate.

In the 1980s 'Post-Modernism', the re-discovery and development of the 'Australian Galvanized Iron Tradition' and a new interest in 'historic houses' have had their unconscious influence through magazines and project builders. The photographs on the following pages show Australian examples of all these styles.

We either like or dislike these styles, or don't care one way or another, but unconsciously they affect our current view of what looks right as a home.

When it comes to selecting a style for our home we need to examine our own stylistic baggage. Someone from Queensland used to the Verandah style of the 'North' will respond differently to the idea of 'home' compared to a Melbournian used to 'bluestone Victorian terraces'.

Architectural education starts out by attempting to broaden the student's approach to style by teaching the basic aesthetic grammar that underlines all European architectural styles.

Most of us can't take 5 years off to learn the language of architectural style. We can however think back to what we grew up with. The housing of our childhood recalls 'home' for us whether we really liked it or not.

What 'style' was your childhood home? Unconsciously your childhood home's style will always shape your housing preferences unless you consciously decide that you're after something else.

FALSE IMAGES FROM OVERSEAS

Many Australians were born overseas in England, Europe, the Mediterranean, the Middle East or Asia. The 'homes' they grew up in still remain in their childhood memories as 'home', even though they may be 20 years in the past and 15 000 kilometres away. However they are homes built for different climates, landscapes, cultures and family lifestyles.

Australia is a very different place to the small British Isles, the Ancient cultures of the Middle East or the tropical villages of South East Asia.



1 The Colonial House



2 Victorian Style



3 The P&O Style



4 Virginia Imports



5 'Mock Tudor under Southern Skies'



**6 'The Australian Corrugated Roof Tradition':
Architect, Peter Dalton**



7 The Corrugated roof develops into a new style: Wave House - Architect, Peter Dalton

More recently some of our builders have thought they can capitalise on nostalgia by introducing bastardised versions of the 'Virginian Mansion' or the 'Elizabethan Country House', examples these can be seen in the photographs above.

Such stylistic images don't really reflect the way in which Australians are living their lives in the 1980s and 1990s, or the spirit of Australia as it moves into the 21st century.

THE SPIRIT OF THE TIMES

The spirit of the times always finds its way into architectural style. 'Victorian Australia' was part of a world empire on which the sun never sank, at least until Singapore 1942. 'Victorian Australians' built with the confidence and strength that went with being part of that world empire.

The Australians of the 1920s were recovering from the awful death toll of the first World War where the nation lost tens of thousands of its brightest and youngest. The houses of those times are squat, dark, inward looking, depressing, reflective of a nation grieving for its lost youth.

What is the spirit of Australia in the first decade of the 21st century? There is a mixture of:

- A 'new nationalism' ('the Bi-centennial and all that')
- A 'new environmentalist!' (the Greenhouse Effect, the Ozone Hole, pollution, forest conservation, etc)
- An awareness of a 'National Estate' worth preserving (historic homes, etc)
- An 'uncertainty about the future' (How do we survive in a more competitive world? Do we continue to invest as much in housing, or should it go into computers?)
- An 'uncertainty about who an Australian is' (Multi-culturalism, Aboriginal land rights, and Asian immigration)

In short, a new nationalism is searching to redefine the Australian identity, but is confused about what gets included, and uncertain about the relevance of past lessons for an uncertain future.

BEYOND ECHOES AND IMAGES

The emerging stylistic forces in Australia in the first decade of the 21st century suggest that the style for the Australian home is going to be built on recognition of:

- a continental climatic variety (what is right for the Queensland Sunshine Coast is wrong for Melbourne)
- the re-discovery of valuable Australian architectural traditions such as:
 - the verandah (great protection against the Ozone Hole)
 - curved corrugated steel roofs, (a rediscovery of pioneering practicality)
 - openness in planning (the fun is around the barbecue)
 - the need to tell our neighbours that we are respectable and good citizens (a facade that reflects this)

However, what we need to avoid is the false applications of 'facadism and imported foreign fashions'.

Australians are becoming a little schizophrenic when it comes to matching the practicality of the plan to the facade at the front of the house. We want to be good neighbours and present a face to the street that reflects the substance of our 25 year mortgages, yet we still want individuality and a relaxed lifestyle behind the front door.



For example, if our house is on the south side of the street and the back verandah is always in shade, how many of us would think that it's OK to build a high courtyard wall out the front and turn the front garden into a 'sunny front courtyard'? Yet people in China, Japan, the Middle East and the Mediterranean have been doing just that for hundreds, if not thousands of years, and creating charming and practical environments in which to live.

We still cling to the hand-me-down fashions of the English gentry and the American middle class who want to show off the 'front garden' as a piece of property to the neighbours, rather than applying Australian practicality to the use of our expensive residential real estate.

In the southern half of Australia such respectability, while 'acceptable style', often runs contrary to 'good life style'. What we need to develop is a style of housing that reflects our preference for a relaxed, enjoyable, family lifestyle.

It is marrying our life style with a practical architectural style that is our challenge in the first decade of the 21st century. We need to break out of the bad habits of our forebears, and those we have imported or brought along from overseas.

Whether it is a budget or luxury house, we must all overcome our tendency to residential schizophrenia by learning to build our houses with a style which reflects the variety of life in the 'Great Southern Land'.

This will come about only when we build in a style based on the sun as the generator of design; geometry that is simple and organised around a relaxed, fun-loving, enjoyable lifestyle; bringing the outdoors indoors; with simple proportions providing a balance and order, and a feeling for the colour and texture that blends with the setting for our house, be it beside the sea, in a suburban setting, or surrounded by the bush.

Only then will we be able to talk confidently of an Australian residential style, and answer the question 'What style?' with a quiet certainty that doesn't require pretension.