



the material city

DENSITY AND DESIGN IN CONTEMPORARY
AUSTRALIAN ARCHITECTURE

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revisiting our home in australia

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Now you must just take a peep out of the window, pushing aside the muslin curtains, & beyond the garden you see a very extensive plain or park lands (for nothing obstructs the view at our back premises excepting the fence or palings) . . . And about 5 or 6 miles distant the view is bounded by a belt of large trees & when hot weather is the 'go' you can see the Gulf, & occasionally ships at a distance of some 15 or 20 miles. The sea breeze blows fresh into our back windows & door & sometimes rather too fresh & cold, but still it is pleasant . . .¹ - Joseph Elliott

When Joseph Elliott began writing a letter home to his mother in England in the winter of 1860, it was very much a personal exercise in describing a new family life in Adelaide in the hope of enticing her to join them. Elliott could not have imagined his letter might become historical artefact. His words and diagrams describe in intimate detail the now lost sea views and breezes afforded North Adelaide and the small attached stone cottage the family rented from the carpenter and coffin-maker owner who lived next door.

Contextualised by architect and historian Stephan Pikusa in his 1984 book *Our Home in Australia*, Elliott's 14,000 word letter achieved its place as a fundamental piece of our Colonial housing history. Beyond mere description, Elliott provided a walk-through account of the approach to the house in Jeffcott Street from the city centre; of the decorative front garden; of every room of the house; and of the various productive and utilitarian uses of the rear yard. In doing so, Elliott created a narrative of a way of life. Domestic intimacy was common in nineteenth century housing, as witnessed by Elliott's first-person account of his home at every conceivable scale, from handheld objects, furniture pieces and room arrangements, to the layout and use of garden and yard spaces and the house's relationship to Adelaide's coast - a twenty minute car ride away in today's terms, yet tangible in the Elliotts' time.

The four rooms of the Elliott house - typical of the evolved English cottage and evidenced across Australia - were forced to serve multiple purposes in accommodating the family of five whilst also providing a dedicated parlour, sitting room and kitchen, as was the fashion of the era. The sitting room, which formed just one-quarter of this small family home, was at any given time a place to eat, sit, read, entertain, play, mend, dress, sleep, and, as

was common in Victorian times and experienced first-hand by the Elliott family, be nursed through death.² At a time in our housing history where we are once more being urged to consider more proximate living, shared amenity and multi-use spaces, *Our Home in Australia* takes on a new significance. In the context of increasingly complex household structures and the contemporary necessity for new infill housing types, Elliott's letter and Pikusa's commentary provide reminders that smaller living is by no means a new concept.

Further clues to future housing can be found in Pikusa's *The Adelaide House 1836 to 1901*,³ in which Adelaide's inner-suburban makeup can be understood relative to its early material predilections. Where many early houses in Australian capital cities have been lost over time, Adelaide would seem to have a significant number of remnant late nineteenth and early twentieth century villas and cottages throughout its older suburbs. Whilst this may be partially attributed to a slower growth rate than most other Australian capital cities (resulting in a reduced need to consolidate the suburbs into denser forms), it can largely be attributed to the state's statutory limitation of the use of non-flammable cladding materials and by further statutes that established limits for the size of allotments and the spaces between dwellings.⁴

The South Australian Building Act of 1858 set into legislation rules relating to fire protection that would fundamentally change the material characteristics of the City of Adelaide's buildings.⁵ Prior to this, as identified by Pikusa, timber buildings roofed in thatch or timber shingles predominated colonial Adelaide, with the only statutory restriction being an 1841 ruling that footpaths could be encroached only with a verandah.⁶ The 1858 Fire Act would profoundly change this vernacular ad hoc manner of building by dictating that:

*No building having its sides, ends, roof, or other part of its exterior covered or shall be erected in the City of Adelaide, nor shall the partitions or ceilings of any building hereafter to be erected, or any part thereof respectively, be of calico, canvas, paper, or other inflammable material whatsoever.*⁷

Significantly, the Act stipulated that by January 1st 1863, any existing

buildings fitting this description and located within 30 feet (9m) of another building, were to be either wholly demolished or have the affected flammable elements removed in their entirety. When coupled with the fact that there was no building set-back statute in place in Adelaide until 1923, this nine metre proximity rule saw many existing buildings removed. Pikusa argues that this move away from timber cladding (and therefore its associated timber framing), reinforced the stylistic preference of the times, which favoured brick construction when it could be sourced and afforded.⁸ Pikusa observes that by 1861, many original colonial houses had been replaced, with stone and brick dwellings making up 64% of Adelaide's houses.⁹

These factors of English cottage inheritance, material tastes and statutory obligation combine to explain the DNA building-blocks of Adelaide's highly identifiable suburban form, which sees a predominance of detached low-rise villas and cottages, constructed in brick and arranged in freestanding rows. In a discussion of shifting demographics and a move towards varied forms of density, there is an implied question to be asked of these houses, particularly when considered against the Elliott family's use of historically flexible space. In a time of intense retention, restoration, alteration and addition, how might we strategically rework the masonry cottage and its suburban gaps to ensure the old housing we love remains the housing we need?

- Endnotes**
1. Joseph Elliott and Stefan Pikusa, *Our home in Australia: a description of cottage life in 1860* (Sydney: Flannel Flower Press, 1984), 42.
 2. *ibid.*
 3. Stefan Pikusa, *The Adelaide House 1836 to 1901: the evolution of principal dwelling types* (Netley, South Australia: Wakefield Press, 1986).
 4. *ibid.*, 35.
 5. *An Act to regulate certain Buildings, and for preventing Mischiefs by Fire in the City of Adelaide*, 1858. No.17.
 6. *The Adelaide House 1836 to 1901: the evolution of principal dwelling types*, 35.
 7. *An Act to regulate certain Buildings, and for preventing Mischiefs by Fire in the City of Adelaide*, 1858.
 8. The impact of brick production on construction methods and tastes is also described by John Archer in *The great Australian dream: the history of the Australian house* (Pymble, N.S.W.: Angus & Robertson, 1996).
 9. *The Adelaide House 1836 to 1901: the evolution of principal dwelling types*, 23.

Above right: The Elliott family sitting room from the *Notebook of Joseph Elliott*, 1860. State Library of South Australia.

Below right: The Elliott family's rear yard from the *Notebook of Joseph Elliott*, 1860. State Library of South Australia.

