Architects and Garden Suburbs: The Politics of Melbourne's Interwar Suburban Landscapes

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This paper charts how architects, conservative businessmen and conservative politicians helped develop Melbourne's interwar garden suburbs. It maps the ways in which architects transformed these suburban landscapes into highly charged political symbols that supported the values of the conservative Nationalist, United Australia and Liberal parties.

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In 1942, the leader of the conservative United Australia Party, Robert Menzies, gave a radio talk called 'The Forgotten People'. In his address, Menzies highlighted the importance of 'one little piece of earth with a house and a garden' in the formation of Australians (figure 1). It was the speaker's firm conviction that owning a house and garden equated with the 'best instincts' of the Australian people (Menzies, 1942/1992). Over time, the speech gained a mythical status among members of the Liberal Party that Menzies founded and that he led to victory in 1949 (Brett, 1992).

Today's readers are probably surprised to learn a politician would bother to mention the garden in a landmark speech. In 1942, however, the garden was part of a much larger landscape comprising private suburban houses set in gardens on tree-lined streets with a public park nearby. At the time, Australians called this ensemble a garden suburb. John Dixon Hunt's observation (1992, p 3) that gardens are 'the most eloquent expressions of complex cultural ideas' has particular relevance to understanding Menzies' motivation in referring to the garden in his 1942 address. So too does Anne Birmingham's (1986) framing of the British landscape in terms of ideology and Nigel Everett's (1994) discussion of Tory representations of the English landscape. By contrast, Australian politically charged landscapes are rarely studied in terms of their ideology.

This paper departs from the extant scholarship approach that has produced a meticulously researched and catalogued development of garden suburbs throughout Australia (Freestone, 2010). Instead, it focuses on Melbourne, the capital of the Australian state of Victoria, which until 1927 was the national capital and throughout the twentieth century had a disproportionate influence on Australian non-Labor politics. It charts how architects, conservative businessmen and conservative politicians helped develop the garden suburb. It also maps the ways in which interwar architects transformed Melbourne's garden suburbs into highly charged political symbols.

Architects were well placed to develop a conservative ideology about Melbourne's post-war garden suburbs. As middle-class professional men, who were generally educated at private grammar schools and whose wives came from well-connected families, they were acculturated in the non-Labor mores and

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representations of the city. Their religious backgrounds also attuned them to the blend of capitalism, state socialism and non-conformist values that distinguished Victorian non-Labor politics from the politics in other states (Blainey, 2013). Having been to war, they were also aware of the threats to peace and were well positioned to take advantage of the changes in relationships between the Australian state and capital that had occurred during the war. Moreover, the ability of architects to think in images, before popular movies were widely seen by Australians, equipped the profession to take advantage of the new media, especially the photographic magazine, to reach new suburban audiences.

Interwar architects synthesised these elements into a coherent metaphysical and political vision of what Melbourne's garden suburbs stood for. Accordingly, they achieved a rare thing in a society as pragmatic as Australia's: they endowed Melbourne's suburbs with symbolic meanings that supported the values of the conservative Nationalist, United Australia and Liberal parties, and believed these values were shared by the whole of society.

Realising that their vision of architecture was political, they also became politicians and community leaders. As well as giving the profession a say in Melbourne and the nation, these roles allowed them to create an ideology centred on the suburban home and garden. Understanding that modern politics was about images and symbols, architects represented their profession as being concerned with democracy rather than having an elitist outlook. This perspective led architects to work with governments to develop new forms of housing in the 1920s, and during the 1930s to find solutions regarding flats and the housing crisis caused by the Great Depression. Being politically adept, Melbourne's architects re-invented the garden suburb to suit the times, and they were responsible for the spread of these suburbs, and their values, across Melbourne regardless of which political party was in power.

Sons of the manse spread the word about architecture

One of the particular characteristics of Victorian non-Labor politics was a rapprochement between capital and Labour and the tempering of capitalism

by progressive, Protestant, non-conformist values. Indeed, during the 1890s, Congregationalists and Methodists had been influential in the new Australian Labor Party. The increasing influence of Irish Catholics in the Labor Party, however, saw these Protestants turn to the non-Labor side of politics. These divisions widened with the conscription referenda that inflamed sectarian divisions during the First World War (Davison, 1983).

Many of Melbourne's interwar architects came from non-conformist religious backgrounds. Among them were Marcus Barlow (1890–1954), Robert Hamilton (1892–1948), Henry Kingsley Henderson (1883–1942), Best Overend (1909–1977) and Arthur Stephenson (1890–1967). Hamilton was the son of a Presbyterian clergyman, Overend was the offspring of a Methodist minister and Stephenson's father was a Congregational lay preacher. Henderson's grandfather had been the first incumbent of the influential Congregational church in Melbourne's fashionable Collins Street. The father of architect and housing reformer Marcus Barlow was a parishioner of the Kew Congregational church for many years, and well known for being 'very interested in church work'. These sons of the manse were consequently well placed to reconcile the non-conformist ideal of being a force for good with modern capitalism and believed Melbourne had a special role to play in the new Australian nation (*Age*, 22 April 1936, p 10; *Argus*, 22 November 1927, p 13; 7 April 1942, p 2; Fisher, 1990; Goad, 1995).

Having been raised within earshot of Sunday sermons, these architects understood the importance of the written and spoken word in reforming and improving society. Consequently, they all wrote and spoke with fervour about the moral duty of the profession to improve Australians' living conditions. Kingsley Henderson, after becoming vice-chair of the conservative Melbourne newspaper *Argus* in 1934, saw to it Overend was employed to write a regular column about architecture for the paper. Melbourne's architects also took advantage of new newspapers and magazines that were the brainchild of Keith Murdoch, who in time would become the country's pre-eminent press baron. Murdoch's publications appealed to both male readers, for whom the suburbs were a retreat from 'the cares of business', and female readers, who saw architects as understanding their concerns about living in congenial, healthy, modern homes and the need for beauty in garden suburbs. Murdoch, like Hamilton, was the son of a Presbyterian minister (Younger, 2003; Zwar, 1980).

The soldier–architect in war and peace

The First World War was another important influence. Both Robert Hamilton and Arthur Stephenson served in the Australian Army. Other Melbourne architects who went to war included Arthur Blackett (1873–1962), John Gawler (1885–1978), Leighton Irwin (1892–1962), George Burridge Leith, Marcus Martin (1893–1981) and Percy Oakley (1884–1955) (Australian War Memorial, 1918; Butler, 1983; Lewis, 1996; Rayworth, 1986; Tibbits, 1979).

While architects were fighting overseas, relations between the state and capital underwent a revolution at home. The Australian government extended its activities into areas that had previously been the preserve of private enterprise. To win the war, the government also sought the advice of Melbourne's leading businessmen. In 1916, for instance, the leading financier and industrialist in

Melbourne, and Australia more generally, WL Baillieu (1859–1936), became a member of the Commonwealth Financial Council. On the advice of this captain of industry, the government authorised the Australian Wheat Board to compulsorily acquire and resell the nation's wheat crop. This would have been inconceivable in conservative circles before the war.

Sir William McBeath (1865–1931) was another businessman whose talents the government drew on. His financial expertise as chair of the government-owned State Bank of Victoria recommended him to the position of chair of the Australian Imperial Force's Disposal Board in London after the war. This advice and expertise from the country's leading businessmen and financiers further strengthened the accommodation between government and capital that had been a hallmark of Victorian politics before the war. It also gave McBeath first-hand knowledge of the challenges Australia faced in dealing with the social and economic dislocation arising from the war.

In London, McBeath met the soldier–architect Arthur Stephenson. To entice Stephenson to return to Australia, he promised to find him work. Proving McBeath true to his word, Stephenson's firm designed 14 state banks in Melbourne's suburbs between 1921 and 1929 (Goad et al, 2004). The war also gave McBeath an appreciation of how his bank's patronage of architects could bring order and stability to a world under threat from the anti-capitalist sentiments that the 1917 Russian revolution had unleashed.

Stephenson was just as profoundly influenced by the war. On the Western Front he had learnt how the morale among the men under his command was related to the supply of clothing, food, housing and munitions. After the war, he applied these wartime lessons to Australian society. He believed the responsibility of the architect in peacetime was to design 'social amenities', including housing, to maintain 'a healthy (and peaceful) social state' (Stephenson, 1921, p 29) (Fisher 1990; Goad et al, 2004; Vines, 1986).

On returning to Australia, Stephenson and partner PH Meldrum entered a design competition for a war memorial in the Melbourne suburb of Kew. Although this was a perfectly natural thing to do for a new architectural practice looking for work, Stephenson had another compelling reason to enter the competition. As an officer, he had written to the parents of the men who had died in action under his command. Designing the Kew war memorial allowed him to give physical expression to the emotions he and the recipients of his letters felt on learning the news that his men, and their sons, had died on battlefields far from home. Now he could set these dead men's names in stone (Heritage Council of Victoria, 2004).

In the aftermath of sectarian divisions arising from the conscription debates, the suburban municipality gave the architect the task of creating landscapes that the whole community could recognise as sacred places. For example, the Kew war memorial, designed by the former mayor, member of the local recruitment committee and architect Harry Tompkins, was built not on church land but on a site transferred to the municipality by the government (*Camberwell & Hawthorn Advertiser*, 27 January 1917, 30 August 1918; Heritage Council of Victoria, 2004).

Politics also influenced Melbourne's suburban war memorials. This is apparent in the war memorial built in working-class Northcote. Unlike the Kew memorial, its location – beside the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall designed by architect

Harry Norris (Ward, 2001) – was a highly political gesture. Many of the diggers living in this suburb were radicalised by their time in the trenches, placing them at odds with members of the Returned Soldiers and Sailors Imperial League (RSSIL), an organisation established to contain the radicalism of returning soldiers. As the RSSIL met in the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall, the hall was a means of defending the post-war order against the radical digger (Cathcart, 1988).

Historians have given considerable attention to the psychological effects of trench warfare in the creation of modern European memory. They have also charted the way modern artists represented soldiers, whose amputated limbs were replaced by prosthetics and crutches, as part human and part machine (Fussell, 1975). Despite this focus, little attention has been given to how Australians' wartime experiences in the trenches influenced peacetime architectural practices of the likes of Stephenson. How the class and public school backgrounds of Melbourne's soldier–architects – Stephenson and Oakley, for instance, had been educated at Melbourne and Brighton Grammars respectively – made them less likely to be radicalised by the war. How they took advantage of their pre-war Protestant upbringing to represent themselves to Melbourne businessmen and Nationalist politicians as dependable, professional men who could be relied on to defend society from Bolshevism. How Melbourne's architects in peacetime built on the wartime cooperation between the Australian government and capital. And the ways in which their religious backgrounds made them both receptive to leading post-war politics toward a New (non-conformist) Jerusalem, and how this accorded with Nationalist Party narratives designed to blunt radical modernity in post-war Australian society.

Architects' and government's instrumentalities after the war

If war memorials, in working-class Northcote and middle-class Kew, illustrate the ways architects throughout Melbourne's suburbs made sacred landscapes into community symbols, the profession was equally adept at endowing domestic architecture with symbolic meanings. The 1919 State Savings Bank Act and the 1920 Housing and Reclamation Act provided workers and ex-soldiers who earned less than £400 a year a chance to buy a home in the suburbs. In 1921 the bank employed the soldier–architect George Burridge Leith to design the houses.

The State Savings Bank's decision to employ an architect allowed a new class of Australians to afford architecturally designed houses in Melbourne's post-war suburbs. Leith's appointment accorded with the views of the chair of the bank, William McBeath, about the importance of architects in post-war Australian society. As a member of the Nationalist Party, he believed owning a house in the suburbs 'made people take an interest in the Government and finance of the country' (*Argus*, 10 March 1927, p 15). It has been estimated that one in seven of the houses built in Melbourne during the 1920s was a State Bank house designed by Leith (Murray and White, 1992; Priestley, 1984) (figure 2).

McBeath's vision, however, went well beyond building houses in the suburbs. Having served from 1890 to 1917 on the Camberwell Council in Melbourne's middle-class eastern suburbs, he brought that extensive experience to his State Bank chairmanship. As a municipal councillor, he had been instrumental in making Camberwell into Melbourne's quintessential garden suburb. In this
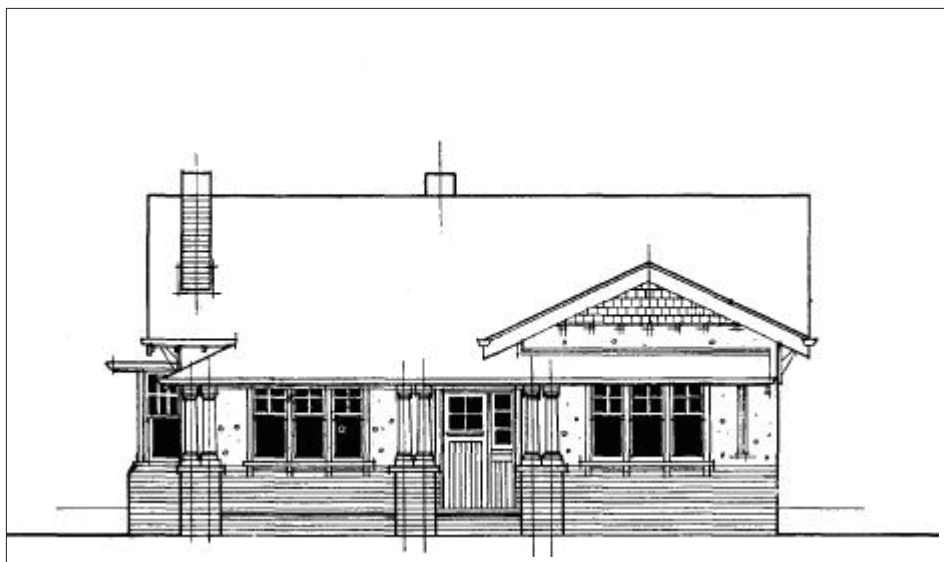
middle-class enclave, Protestants raised families in detached houses, tended their gardens, played in an abundance of public parks, walked and drove down tree-lined streets to church, and voted for the Nationalist Party.

McBeath applied what he had learnt in Camberwell to the whole of Melbourne. Through his involvement, an essential component of the garden suburb movement – well-designed houses – was available in working-class suburbs on the other side of the Yarra River. While the bank could not insist on local councils establishing parks and planting trees in streets, McBeath held firm to his, and his political party's, vision of the ideal garden suburb. In 1927 the bank took a further step in realising its chair's vision. Inspired by British and local garden suburbs, it laid out a new garden suburb, adjacent to the working-class suburb of Port Melbourne. In this way, as chair of the State Bank from 1918 to 1931, McBeath was able to achieve even more than in his 27 years as a Camberwell councillor (*Argus*, 10 March 1931, p 15; Blainey, 1964; Harris, 1988; Murray and White, 1992; Vines, 1986; Younger, 2003).

The Victorian government's involvement in the private housing market was only one of its initiatives arising from the war that had consequences for the suburban landscape. The State Electricity Commission of Victoria (SEC) was another. Established in 1918, it developed the brown coal fields of Victoria's La Trobe Valley to supply cheap electricity to Victorian households and industries and modernise the economy. Such an ambitious project demanded considerable expertise. After William McBeath sounded him out, General Sir John Monash agreed to be general manager of the SEC, bringing with him the skills he had acquired as the wartime commander of the Australian Army on the Western Front. Monash's appointment demonstrates not only McBeath's considerable personal influence but also how the war changed the perceptions of non-Labor politicians, businessmen and soldier–architects about the government's role in modernising the economy. Part of this modernisation involved employing architects. In 1920, a year before the State Bank hired its architect, the SEC engaged the architect Alan La Gerche. In 1921 La Gerche, with Arthur Stephenson, prepared a plan on garden city lines for the new SEC town of Yallourn (Edwards, 1969; Fletcher, 2002; SEC, 1921; Serle, 1982).

While architects, like La Gerche and Leith, provided the technocratic and organisational skills post-war Australian governments required, they also defended middle-class interests. One of these interests was the right of the middle class to make choices about how they wanted to live at a time when government powers were increasing in daily life. Consequently the State Bank, under its Nationalist Party chair, offered customers a range of house designs and protected the small builders who built its houses. The houses did have standard designs that could have been mass produced and assembled on site. It was inconceivable, however, for a Nationalist bank chair, who feared the spread of Bolshevism, to tell home owners how to live, or to destroy the livelihoods of small builders despite the enormous strides being made in mass production in the United States of America (Smith, 1993).

Crafting an image of the architect

The State Bank's houses and the plan for Yallourn allowed architects to become involved in the lives of people who could never have afforded an architect on their own. The houses represent the increasing democratisation of the profession during the interwar period. This change in architectural culture also saw architects establish service organisations where middle-class men could meet each other and serve the community. The first of these was the United States organisation Rotary, which was brought to Australia in 1921 by Melbourne architect Walter Drummond, a partner of the soldier–architect John Gawler. Architects who joined Rotary included Thomas Buchan, principal of the Geelong firm of Laird & Buchan, and soldier–architect and Brighton councillor Percy Oakley, who in 1935 became president of the Melbourne branch of Rotary (*Argus*, 13 September 1930, p 20; Freeman, 1996).

Rotary, however, allowed only one member of any given profession in each of its branches. In response, 22-year-old John Buchan (1909–1998), who like his Rotarian father was an architect, founded Apex in 1931 to foster 'the civic, commercial, social and moral welfare of the community'. In allowing multiple members of a profession to join a local branch, Apex was a much broader-based community organisation than Rotary. Both organisations provided a way for middle-class suburban men to fraternise with each other just as members of trade unions did. They also re-affirmed the fundamental belief that capitalism and voluntary organisations were the bedrock of Australian middle-class society. Yet it was Apex's Australian egalitarianism that helped bind Australians together during the Great Depression (Page, 1990).

In the 10 years between the founding of Rotary and Apex in Australia, architects tailored their image to a much wider audience than just the elite of Australian society who, in the Edwardian summer before 1914, had been among their most important clients. After the war, Melbourne's architects transmitted the values of this elite to a mass audience. In this task, they were helped by the advent after the war of newspapers such as Keith Murdoch's *Herald* and magazines such as *Australian Home Beautiful*, whose cover and photographic spreads of homes by Melbourne architects appealed to women readers.

In 1923 the *Herald* sponsored the *Herald* Ideal Homes competition and exhibition to increase its circulation among suburban readers. The *Weekly Times*,

one of the flagship newspapers in Murdoch's stable, reviewed the exhibition. It declared 'the ideal home is not a monopoly of the rich', and went on to describe how 'it is within the power of nearly all men, no matter what their calling, to own their own home'. Furthermore, 'the disposition of all classes to buy a block of land and build a house' and 'the increasing number of depositors in the Savings Banks' had changed the national character: 'Australians had evolved beyond the restless and somewhat spendthrift blood of their pioneering fathers, and had settled down to the steady job'. The architect not only offered homes that enshrined 'beauty, hygiene and labour-saving devices and contrivances' but just as importantly could 'teach home owners what they can hope to do with the capital they command' (*Weekly Times*, 31 March 1923, p 34).

Like other members of Melbourne's establishment, Murdoch appreciated the role architects could play in his business and private life. In 1923 he engaged Harry Tompkins (who had designed the Kew war memorial) to design the *Herald*'s new head office in Melbourne's central business district. Later Murdoch held an architectural competition to find a suitable design for Newspaper House in Melbourne's Collins Street. And he employed architect Desbrowe Annear to design his country retreat on the Mornington Peninsula. Significantly, too, he was prepared to use his newspapers and magazines to promote the architect and domestic architecture to the new home-owning middle class created by the modern savings bank. All of these moves accorded with the cultural disposition and values of members of the Nationalist Party (*Herald*, 16 March 1923, p 1, 17 March 1923, p 1; Younger, 2003; Zwar, 1980).

Anxious to promote its profession's role in post-war Australian society, the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects (RVIA) organised an Exhibition of Domestic Architecture in 1928. In metaphorical terms, the exhibition offered different classes of people the opportunity to meet each other in their houses and gardens. It also allowed them to see how the other half lived. Moreover, in showing how much people had in common with one other, the exhibition provided a narrative of social harmony in the suburbs rather than the story of class conflict constructed by those on the political left. The exhibition's motto makes this point abundantly clear: 'it is better to build homes for the humble than to build palaces for kings'. It was a sign of just how much architects wished to promote themselves to the everyman and woman of Australia's interwar suburbs (RVIA, 1928).

The RVIA's exhibition included a design competition. Following the example of the 1923 *Herald* competition, different budgets were allocated to different house designs. A basic price of £1,000 was assigned to a modest timber home, with an additional £500 buying a brick dwelling. Up to £25,000 could be spent on a grand home. The cost of the land was included in the budget. With an eye to promoting the next generation of architects, the competition was open to members of the Victorian Architectural Students' Society as well as Institute members.

The 23-year-old Roy Grounds (1905–1981) and Geoffrey Mewton were awarded first prize for their timber house. The practice of Walter Butler and Marcus Martin was successful in the other two categories. In making their decisions, the judges were mindful of the contribution the garden made. They praised the 'beautiful setting' of Grounds and Mewton's winning design, judged the garden of Butler and Martin's £1,500 brick house as 'charming' (*Argus*, 1 May

1928, pp 8–9), and commended the winning entry in the final category for the way in which the house and garden sat within its environment. The inclusion in the competition of a timber home costing £1,000 also showed architects were not just interested in housing the well-to-do who could afford Butler and Marcus Martin's prize-winning designs. The prize awarded to Roy Grounds also announced to the public the next generation of architects were just as committed as the older generation to providing well-designed houses to people of modest means (Blackett and Inskip, 1928; Rayworth, 1986; RVIA, 1928).

Images of the three prize-winning awards were reproduced in the RVIA's journal (*Journal of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects, JRVIA*), popular illustrated magazines, and newspapers. This publicity brought the exhibition to a far greater audience than the 7,000-odd people who attended it. Realising that capital both owned the means of production and had the wherewithal to endlessly reproduce cultural, political and moral views throughout the nation's suburbs, architects were keen to popularise in the media the view that 'the ideal home is not a monopoly of the rich'. With the advent of both photographic magazines and radio, they were acutely aware domestic architecture was not just about bricks and mortar but also about images, symbols, identity and civic endeavour.

In 1928 the young Roy Grounds also won the RVIA's annual war memorial scholarship. Recognising that modern architecture and Hollywood were both about creating images for the masses, Grounds travelled to the United States where he designed studio sets for Radio-Keith-Orpheum Pictures and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (Hamann, 2007). Melbourne's newspapers also continued to promote architecture. In 1934 the conservative Melbourne *Argus* commissioned the 25-year-old modernist architect, Best Overend, to write about architecture (Goad, 1995). With access to the media, Melbourne's architects were extraordinarily well placed to garner support for the idea that Australian identity was intimately linked to owning a home in a garden suburb, and to turn this idea into a potent conservative political force at local, state and national levels.

Architects and non-Labor politics

During the interwar period, architects were extremely active at all levels of Australian politics. They were on the local councils in many middle-class suburbs. They were active on the Melbourne Metropolitan Town Planning Commission. They created a new vision of the national capital Canberra, enshrining the interwar conservative belief that the national character was to be found in Australia's suburbs. They were also active members of conservative political parties, rallying middle-class Australians they knew – through their participation in local councils, the service organisations they founded and the businesses on whose boards they sat – to defend (their) Australia from economic solutions the Labor Party proposed during the Great Depression. In brief, their political re-imagining of Melbourne's suburbs created middle-class visions of the nation.

Architects were well represented on Melbourne's municipal councils. Kingsley Henderson served on Malvern City Council from 1917 to 1922 and Percy Oakley on Brighton Council from 1919 into the 1930s. Frank Stapley was a Melbourne City Council alderman from 1921 to 1939, Harry Tompkins a member of Kew Council until 1923 and John Gawler on the Box Hill Council from 1927 to 1951.

Robert Hamilton and Robert Henry Solly were councillors on Prahran and Melbourne City Councils respectively during the 1930s. Further afield, Thomas Buchan served from 1934 to 1951 on the Newtown and Chilwell Council, a well-heeled, residential area adjoining the port city of Geelong in rural Victoria.

This involvement in local government was extremely important at a time when the profession was nurturing the ideal that Australians of all classes should live in a home designed by an architect. In a society where 'the disposition of all classes to buy a block of land and build a house' had led to piecemeal suburban developments rather than the planned garden suburbs of the United States and England, architects on middle-class councils could create visually coherent suburbs by making and using municipal bylaws, planting street trees and developing public parks. By extolling the virtues of civic architecture, they helped create garden suburbs that, although different to the much-lauded overseas examples, brought a sense of community and a shared vision to the individualistic suburbs. The presence of architects on democratically elected municipal councils also reinforced in the public's mind that the profession actually believed what they said about the democratisation of architecture. As a result, when the architect spoke, people listened (*Argus,* 14 September 1925, p 14, 24 June 1938, p 6; Balderstone, 1983; Dunstan 1990; *JRVIA*, September 1934; Lewis, 1996).

Architects on suburban councils were also aware of the need to develop a master plan for the entire city. As a consequence, the Victorian government established the Melbourne Metropolitan Town Planning Commission in 1922. The profession played an important role in the commission, chaired by alderman Frank Stapley (1858–1944), a former president of the RVIA. Well acquainted with Melbourne's problems, the commission's 1929 master plan advocated zoning, transport planning and more open space as ways of enhancing the city. However, because of the 1929 Wall Street crash, Great Depression, and a Country Party government that lacked interest in Melbourne, the commission's recommendations were not implemented (Dunstan, 1990).

Creating the new Australian capital, Canberra, was another undertaking in which Melbourne architects were influential. In the same year as the Melbourne Metropolitan Town Planning Commission was established, the Nationalist Party government, under Prime Minister Stanley Melbourne Bruce, announced an architectural competition to design Canberra's suburbs along 'modern, aesthetic and economic lines'. Soldier–architect and councillor Percy Oakley and his partner Stanley Oakes won the competition. This socially and politically conservative architectural duo set about re-casting American architect Walter Burley Griffin's pre-war plan for Canberra in the image of Melbourne's suburban architecture. Their penultimate success came in 1925 when they were commissioned to design the Prime Minister's official residence in the national capital.

While Oakley's work in Canberra provided a new narrative about the nation whose values were in accord with the Nationalist Party, Griffin largely continued to privilege the pre-war Australian pursuit of leisure in his subdivisions. Unlike a soldier–architect, the theosophically inclined Griffin was not interested in thinking about garden suburbs as a means by which the state and capital might pacify the working class after the war. Oakley's vision of domestic architecture became the bedrock on which the Nationalist Party could build the national

character and succeed electorally in Australia's post-war suburbs. For this reason, Bruce urged 'the architect and the people … to get closer together' (*Age*, 7 June 1927, pp 16–17; Freeman, 1996, pp 109–118; Nichols, 2002, pp 214–15; Plant, 1987, pp 111–13).

The defeat of Bruce's government in 1929, and the subsequent onset of the Great Depression, however, challenged the conservative values enshrined in its images of the 1920s garden suburb. Architects responded by becoming involved in national politics. For instance, during the general election of 1931 Apex founder John Buchan rallied support for the United Australia Party candidate Richard Casey, who became a close friend. Casey went on to hold influential posts in the Lyons and Menzies governments.

Kingsley Henderson was even more influential in conservative politics. A former councillor, an architect who won commissions to design head offices, clubs and apartments in Collins Street, and a member of numerous company boards, Henderson exemplifies the connections between architecture and the big end of town. In 1931 Henderson rallied conservative citizens from Melbourne's garden suburbs to join the All for Australia League, a citizens' organisation that opposed Labor's unorthodox fiscal policies in the Depression. Intent on destroying Labor politically, Henderson, together with Robert Menzies and four influential Melbourne businessmen, persuaded Joseph Lyons to leave the Labor government and lead the new United Australia Party to victory at the 1931 general election. Henderson's influence continued to grow. He became vice president in 1934, and president in 1940, of the *Argus* and *Australasian* board, newspapers that were the voice of conservative Melbourne (*Argus*, 7 April 1942, p 2; Balderstone, 1983; Henderson, 2011).

Some architects joined Menzies' new Liberal Party. They included Bernard Evans (1905–1981) and Robert Henry Solly (1883–1968), who were members of Melbourne City Council in the 1950s. Robert Hamilton was a Liberal Party member of the Victorian parliament until his death in 1948. John Buchan became president of the Victorian branch of the Liberal Party, helping to create a close and harmonious relationship between Melbourne City Council and the Victorian Liberal government after it came to power in 1955. Buchan gained a reputation as 'a manipulator of the nuts and bolts of the Liberal Party and a man of substantial influence' (Page, 1990, p 108). His political contacts helped Buchan transform his father's Geelong architectural practice into a national enterprise (*Argus*, May 1948 p 5, 31 August 1953, p 1; Dunstan, 2007; *Hobart Mercury*, 1 September 1953, p 10; *JRVIA*, March 1930, p 3; Page, 1990).

Re-inventing overseas traditions

Among Victoria's garden suburbs, only a handful follow their English counterparts. The Fisherman's Bend estate developed by the government-owned State Bank is one example. Another is the SEC township of Yallourn, designed by La Gerche, who admired Welwyn Garden City laid out in 1920, and Stephenson, whose models were Bournville and Port Sunlight built by enlightened Quaker industrialists to house their workers (Stephenson, 1921). In general, however, Melbourne's garden suburbs were not simulacra of those in England. Very few Australian businessmen had the means, or imagination, to build Bournville and Port Sunlight in the antipodes.

Australia's leading industrialist and financier WL Baillieu was an exception. His formidable business acumen led to the development of many new Australian industries, including the Electrolytic Zinc Company. In 1920 Baillieu courageously used his family's fortune to underwrite the £1 million float needed to build an electrolytic zinc smelter in Tasmania. Like William McBeath, Baillieu had encouraged the architect Arthur Stephenson to return to Australia after the war. And like McBeath, Baillieu became Stephenson's patron, engaging him and Arts and Crafts architect Walter Butler to design the Electrolytic Zinc Company's garden town of Lutana in Tasmania. Yet, despite the best of intentions, only 42 houses out of the proposed 200 were ever built (Fletcher, 2002; Freestone, 1989, 2010; Goad et al, 2004; Yule, 2012).

In the Victorian parliament (1901–1917), Baillieu supported the introduction of old-age pensions and championed legislation to secure industrial harmony. After the Armistice, he put together 'a democratic programme to secure better conditions for working men', hoping it might influence a new international order (Poynter, 1979, p 143). If even Baillieu could not build Lutana, there was little hope that other enlightened Australian industrialists would replicate the British garden cities developed by enlightened 'captains of industry' (Stephenson, 1921). For example, the American Ford Motor Company built an assembly line in Geelong but left it to the larger-than-life entrepreneur Clement John de Garis (1884–1926) to engage Arthur Stephenson, Leighton Irwin (1892–1962) and IG Anderson in 1924 to design a new garden suburb as a speculative venture (Freestone, 2010; Nichols, 2002).

It was such experiences that led architects to realise the piecemeal development of Australian suburbia, where subdivisions maximised the owner's profit, would continue. Consequently, Melbourne's architects created distinctively Australian solutions that translated overseas models to suit local conditions, re-invented local traditions and endowed images of suburban homes with symbolic and political meanings.

Re-inventing local traditions: Flats in Toorak

The Great Depression threatened to undo the representation of the garden suburb as a place of social harmony, which architects and conservative businessmen and politicians had cultivated so assiduously during the 1920s. As discussed above, the middle-class suburbs were bulwarks against the social and political unrest of the Depression. Yet the anxiety over their future remained even after the United Australia Party won the 1931 general election. So in 1933, at the height of the Depression, the founder of the Toorak branch of the Nationalist Party, and First World War veteran, Sir James Barrett (1862–1945) led a campaign to stop flats being built in Toorak, the suburb where Melbourne's social and business elite resided.

During the campaign Barrett observed that the 'larger gardens of Toorak are rapidly disappearing' and predicted the 'smaller gardens will follow suit'. Indeed, along with the RVIA president, he foresaw the day when the suburb would be filled with 'barracks rather than gardens' (*Argus*, 25 January 1933, p 8). As the chair of the Town Planning Association of Victoria, Barrett was just as concerned to stop barrack-style flats being built in Melbourne's other suburbs, and determined to

defend the values associated with owning a home in Melbourne's garden suburbs (Murray-Smith, 1979).

This antipathy towards flats was widespread. In 1928 the Victorian Chief Secretary and former Labor Premier George Prendergast, in a speech at the opening of the RVIA Domestic Architecture Exhibition, observed 'individual homes were far better than tenements where there was less individuality in family life and where the dwellings were so much alike' (*Argus*, 2 May 1928, p 21; RVIA, 1928).

Although Robert Hamilton, who had helped organise the RVIA exhibition with Marcus Martin, heard Prendergast's speech, he held a different view. As a local councillor and an architect, he opposed Barrett's campaign, believing instead that building double-storey flats that looked like neighbouring houses could be a way to accommodate Melbourne's growing population. So while Barrett huffed and puffed about the arrival of flats in his neighbourhood, Hamilton, using his position on the local council, developed a new building code that ensured 'only first class buildings of sound design' would be built in the suburb. These regulations limited each block of flats to four or five dwellings of no more than two storeys, demanded each flat have a separate entrance and paid attention to their garden settings (Hamilton, 1938).

By October 1933 Hamilton could point to his design of Moore Abbey in neighbouring South Yarra to prove well-designed flats need not undermine the existing neighbourhood. According to contemporary press reports, Moore Abbey looked like a Tudor village set around 'a village green'. In marrying the best of Toorak with Tudor England, Hamilton had created a community in the finest of British traditions. In designing flats where none of the floor plans were the same and placing them around a village green, this architect – who made a living subdividing the grounds of Melbourne nineteenth-century mansions – distanced himself and his clients from the social experiments of modern British and European architects who saw houses as machines for living, and modern site design as privileging the public over the private garden (*Argus*, 19 October 1933, p 11, 14 December 1933, p 5).

After the construction of Moore Abbey, it was far more difficult for the founder of the Toorak branch of the Nationalist Party to take the moral high ground about flats threatening Melbourne's premier garden suburb or Melbourne's suburbs in general, or to argue that flats would turn garden suburbs into slums. Having found a solution to the flat question, Melbourne's local councils adopted similar building codes. In 1938 Malvern City Council approved Hamilton's design for Denby Dale, a group of Tudor-style flats set in gardens in Glenferrie Road, Kooyong (O'Hanlon, 2002) (figure 3).

After serving in the war, Hamilton became assistant government architect in Bombay, India, where he observed how the British used Englishness for their imperial ends. On returning to Melbourne, Hamilton was inspired by *Houses and Gardens*, penned by influential British Arts and Crafts architect HM Baillie Scott, to build dreams of England that would reassure Melbourne's conservative elite that, despite the upheavals of the Great Depression, they were still in charge of the city's destiny. Hamilton's involvement in local politics provided him with the wherewithal to rework overseas models to suit Australian conditions and to

safeguard the representation of the garden suburb as a place of social harmony (*Argus*, 14 September 1925, p 1; Corbett et al, 2002; Ferguson, 2003; Herbert, 1934.

Arts and Crafts ideas were highly influential in Melbourne during the interwar period (Martin, 1929; Edquist, 2008). Consider Best Overend's choice of topic for his first column in the *Argus* in 1934: a Toorak house and garden designed by Walter Butler. For Overend, Butler's Arts and Crafts design exemplified how a modern house needed to take account of 'the possibilities inherent in the land and garden' (*Argus*, 28 June 1934, p 13). As architectural historian Philip Goad sees it, in this article Overend was playing it safe before revealing his modernist hand to the readers of Melbourne's conservative daily. This interpretation, however, disregards the way the young architect abstracts Butler's Arts and Crafts design to make his point about modern site design (Goad, 1995).

These insights influenced Overend's 1936 design for Cairo, a block of modern, two-storey bachelor flats in working-class Fitzroy (figure 4). In this inner suburb, Overend paid particular attention to providing each apartment with views of the surrounding garden. For Goad (1995), Cairo expresses modernist ideas about setting high-rise blocks of flats in public parks. Given that Cairo replaced a large Victorian mansion, it can also be seen as addressing Barrett's concerns that such replacements would result in barrack-like apartments with no gardens. Indeed, sheltered behind the high brick wall retained from the mansion, Cairo's landscape could be mistaken for a large garden in Toorak. Overend abstracts ideas about the Arts and Crafts house and garden to focus on site design. As well as broadly conforming to Hamilton's new flat code, in a nod to public morality the design allowed every resident to keep an eye on who was visiting the bachelors' apartments. In line with Overend's first article for the *Argus*, Cairo suggests the Arts and Crafts tradition need not be – as Hamilton believed – in opposition to modernism.

Hamilton's flat code was enormously influential in addressing the antipathy toward flats that crossed Melbourne's class and political divides. In making a flat look like a home, Hamilton re-invented a type of architecture disdained by the

likes of Barrett and Prendergast. His genius lay in getting suburban communities to accept well-designed flats could be a home as much as any suburban house and could enhance, rather than destroy, existing garden suburbs. In this way he safeguarded the conservative values enshrined in the suburban home that his party and profession had done so much to instil.

Re-imagining workers' housing

While Toorak residents campaigned against barrack-like flats being built in the neighbourhood, 33 percent of Australian workers were unemployed. If architects had been successful in the 1920s in imbuing domestic architecture with symbolic meanings that both major political parties came to share, in the 1930s they set about finding solutions to the housing problems caused by the Depression. Whereas in the 1920s they and the State Bank had been able to house people who earned less than £400 a year, in the 1930s the unemployed and their families either had no homes at all or were living in substandard accommodation in Melbourne's inner suburbs. Many architects were horrified by these conditions. Alan Devereux, for example, on returning to Melbourne in 1934 after a long absence in London where he had been architect-in-charge of the Battersea Borough Council's housing department, saw the inner suburbs as 'blots on the face of civilisation'. To remedy the situation, he called for Melbourne's workers to be 'housed in settlements of the garden type' well away from industry (*Argus*, 14 December 1934, p 5, 27 July 1935, p 21).

In the 1930s, overseas examples were again consulted in the hope they might provide solutions to Melbourne's housing problems. In 1932 Marcus Martin attended the International Town Planning and Housing Congress hosted by modernist architect Mies van der Rohe in Berlin. At the same time, he visited 'huge housing blocks … of extraordinary variation' 'carried out … on proper town-planning lines' (Martin, 1932, p 173). Arthur Stephenson shared Martin's interest in workers' housing, touring Germany and Sweden and visiting Russian workers' housing in 1933. As to be expected, the confiscation of 'great and

beautiful mansions' from their 'lawful owners' by the Communist government did not go down well with Sir William McBeath's protégé (*Argus*, 29 April 1933, p 4; Stephenson, 1933, p 75). Best Overend was equally concerned about the housing problem. After working in the British modernist architect Wells Coates' London practice, he returned to Melbourne in 1934 where he described the tall blocks of apartments in gardens and parklands seen on his travels (*Argus*, 20 December 1934, p 14).

All of this was a world away from Martin and Butler's designs for Sir William McBeath's new Toorak house (RVIA, 1928). Yet Martin had a social conscience. As he explained to *JRVIA* readers, he had travelled to Berlin believing the profession's 'first consideration' needed to be 'the welfare of mankind' (Martin, 1932, p 173). With similar views, Stephenson (1933) believed 'an Architect should be a guiding force' in solving the social problems of the Depression. As part of this interest in improving people's lives, Martin supported the free kindergarten movement while Stephenson became the leading designer of the modern hospitals in the country.

However, after their success in creating the 1920s garden suburbs, architects and social reformers from the suburbs were not about to agree to the construction of European-style flats for workers. To do so would have diminished the very values they now regarded as the bedrock of Australian suburban society. These perceptions are apparent in the influential social reformer and devout Methodist, Oswald Barnett (1883–1972). During the 1930s, Barnett campaigned relentlessly to redress inadequate housing conditions in Melbourne's inner suburbs that had been built in the nineteenth century. He was deeply troubled that the unemployed and the working class were not able to enjoy the same standard of living as those in Melbourne's 'better class [of] suburb' such as Camberwell where he lived (*JRVIA*, July 1933, p 48).

Barnett enlisted the help of architect Marcus Barlow. Educated at Brighton Grammar, Barlow lived in a beautiful bungalow in Middle Camberwell, and designed grand city offices and English-style houses for the well-to-do. He also had a well-developed Christian social conscience, believing 'it was not fair, in a land like Australia, that people should be compelled to live in slums' (*Age*, 29 June 1937, p 10). In 1935 Barlow joined the study group that Barnett founded to persuade the government to establish a National Housing Board, a body composed of 'experts with a thorough knowledge of slum conditions, architects, benevolent workers, surveyors and social workers' (*Age*, 16 April 1935, p 12). Equally impassioned over the slum question was John Buchan, who in 1935 made a nine-month study tour investigating slum clearance in England and Europe (*Age*, 17 July 1936, p 10; *Argus*, 2 December 1935, p 10, 1 December 1954, p 10).

As an architect, Barlow knew how images shaped public perceptions. With his own house appearing on the front cover of *Australian Home Beautiful* (taken from a painting by his artist cousin George Bell), he had first-hand experience of what occurred when a photograph of an architect's domestic or commercial work was reproduced in newspapers and pictorial magazines. Barlow used this knowledge and his talent as a photographer to great effect. To emphasise the need for new housing to the public and the government, Barlow and Barnett photographed the substandard houses and wretched living conditions of the poor and the unemployed (*Argus*, 8 July 1935, p 8).

As well as enlisting their middle-class, church-going supporters, Barlow and Barnett gained the support of the Labor Party. In July 1935 Barlow, Barnett and Labor's Slum Clearance and Better Housing Committee came up with the idea of building public housing next to the State Bank estate at Fisherman's Bend. Barlow drew up a plan of the proposed subdivision. With an eye to publicity, the campaigners saw to it that the plan was unveiled in parliament and reproduced in the *Age* newspaper the next morning (*Age*, 25 July 1935, p 9).

Prompted by this campaign, Victoria's Country Party government established a Housing Investigation and Slum Abolition Board in 1936 (*Argus*, 10 September 1936, p 11). Its terms of reference included determining the dwellings needed to accommodate people displaced by any housing reclamation schemes, and identifying the land where this housing could be built. Nothing, however, was said about whether the board needed to consider flats as an option. For their part, Barnett and Barlow, the two board members who hailed from Camberwell, refused to countenance overseas models for workers' housing of the type Martin, Stephenson and Overend had seen on their travels. So in December 1936 the government announced that 'flats of many storeys' were not to be built in Melbourne. As the Honorary Minister in the Dunstan government, and chairman of the Housing Investigation and Slum Abolition Board, explained, flats would 'become tenements and develop into slums' (*Argus*, 11 December 1936, p 18). The suburban prejudices of the board's Camberwell members had won the day.

On the day the government announced this decision, the surveyor Saxil Tuxen was appointed as the board's town planner. Tuxen, a well-known supporter of the garden suburb, had visited the United States in 1925, laid out Griffin's Ranelagh estate on Melbourne's Mornington Peninsula the following year, and been a member of the far-seeing but ineffective Melbourne Metropolitan Commission. He was also responsible for innumerable garden subdivisions throughout Melbourne, including Camberwell and working-class Reservoir (*Argus*, 11 December 1936, p 11; Nichols, 2002).

In an address to the Anglican Social Questions Committee in 1937, Barlow described the magnitude of the housing problem: 'During the Depression building had stood still, and although there had been a revival, practically no houses of the less expensive type had been built' (*Age*, 29 June 1937, p 10). As a result, Melbourne faced a shortage of between 25,000 and 30,000 'low renting homes for workers'. Believing private enterprise was unable to solve the problem, Barlow pressed the government to establish a housing board to build well-designed houses and let them to tenants at affordable rents.

Following the advice of the Housing Investigation and Slum Abolition Board, the Victorian parliament established the Housing Commission of Victoria in December 1937 to improve Melbourne's existing housing and build new homes for people of 'limited means'. This was a radical departure from the model developed while William McBeath chaired the State Bank. Rather than eventually owning a home by paying off their bank loan, the Housing Commission's tenants would never own their homes; the government would. This approach challenged the non-Labor belief that private property was the foundation of society. In these circumstances, the type of housing the commission chose to build was of the utmost importance. If it built flats, it would have been open to accusations that

it supported communal social values and Bolshevism. On the other hand, if it built houses in gardens that mimicked the garden suburb, its activities would be seen to be similar to the suburban homes that had helped redefine the national character and, in the eyes of the Nationalist Party, had brought stability to Australian society in the aftermath of the Great War.

In requesting architects to design houses and landscapes for a new group of people who had no chance of owning their own home, the government once again asked the profession to create symbols that could be read, understood and shared across Australian society. Just as they did in the 1920s, architects endowed these new houses and suburbs with conservative meanings. This allowed the middle class who lived in garden suburbs to believe they had something in common with the Housing Commission's tenants. So in April 1938 the commission paid Barlow a £100 stipend to provide it with architectural advice for six months. This arrangement, however, came to an end in September 1938 after questions in the Victorian parliament revealed the Victorian Premier was unaware of the arrangement (*Age*, 23 September 1938, p 14; Argus, 23 September 1938, p 14).

In October 1938 the commission began making plans to relocate people who were living in 800 insanitary homes in working-class South Melbourne and Port Melbourne, identified by the Housing Investigation and Slum Abolition Board as slums (*Construction & Local Government Journal*, 12 October 1938). To rehouse these people, the commission acquired 22 hectares of land at Fisherman's Bend in January 1939. Adjacent to the existing State Bank garden suburb, the site was pregnant with symbolism and meaning. Aware it needed to build an estate that was the equal of its neighbour, in February 1939, the commission announced a competition for a town plan for the entire site and an architectural competition for one-, two- and three- bedroom houses (*Age*, 13 April 1939, p 7).

The results of the architectural competition were announced in May 1939. The first prize of £125 was awarded to EC Jackson of the Commonwealth Department of Works, Melbourne. Arthur C Leith, the son of the State Bank architect, and partner Bartlett received the £75 second prize, Sydney architect EW Andrew the £50 third prize and Frank Heath the fourth prize of £50 (*Age*, 5 May 1939, p 4). Saxil Tuxen, and Melbourne architects Ballantyne and Wilson, won the planning competition (Nichols, 2002).

Eventually the commission proceeded with Tuxen's design. His cul-de-sacs, community centre, playgrounds, private gardens and tree-lined streets were the equal of the State Bank suburb next door. To make this point, the commission wanted to name its suburb Garden City even though the State Bank subdivision was unofficially known as 'Garden City' at this time (*Argus*, 24 January 1939, p 4; Howe, 1988). The Housing Commission was in effect claiming the title of garden suburb from a neighbouring government authority, saying its plans were at least equal to, if not better than, the State Bank's Garden City. To the *Argus*, the choice of name evoked the English garden cities of Letchworth and Welwyn. Representing Garden City as realising British suburban dreams, however, hid the radical nature of the Housing Commission's scheme. It also obscured the important influence of American examples on modern Australian progressive thinking, even though both winners of the planning competition had travelled to the United States. Both had also worked for the American architect Walter Burley

Griffin: Ballantyne as an employee in Griffin's Melbourne office before going to the United States in 1922, and Tuxen, after visiting the United States in 1925, laid out Griffin's Ranelagh estate (*Argus*, 24 January 1939, p 4; Lewis and Aitken, 1992; Nichols, 2002).

To realise its ambitions, the commission enlisted a panel of architects to prepare plans and supervise the construction of the 380 houses it wanted to build at Fisherman's Bend. This panel came into existence in June 1939 with members Frank Heath, Arthur C Leith, Best Overend and JFD Scarborough, all of whom had entered the competition. By July the panel's designs – which were different to the competition's winning entries – were finished. The commission then proceeded to erect four pairs of houses to these new designs before calling for tenders to build the rest (*Age*, 20 May 1939, p 25; *Argus*, 2 June 1939, p 8, 12 July 1939, p 11).

A non-Labor government had once again turned to housing to defuse threats to the social order. After the First World War, the government had looked to the State Bank to provide affordable, well-designed housing. In the Depression, the unemployed were unable to own a house in the suburbs and the State Bank model was no longer viable. At the urging of social reformers and architects, the government developed a new housing model in which it would build houses and rent them out. And because Barlow had sat on the Housing Investigation and Slum Abolition Board, and a panel of architects advised the Housing Commission, these houses, like their State Bank counterparts, were designed by architects. Furthermore, because 'individual homes were far better than tenements' (*Argus*, 2 May 1928, p 21), no flats were built in Garden City. At a time of social and political unrest, the government continued to see well-designed homes in garden suburbs as bulwarks against revolution. In this way, the myth of the conservative *zeitgeist*, the accommodation between capital and labour, was maintained during a time of economic calamity.

Mr Menzies' 'little piece of earth'

Three years after the Housing Commission completed its Garden City at Fisherman's Bend, Robert Menzies (1942) delivered his 'Forgotten People' speech on the radio. The speech re-affirmed the importance of a 'little piece of earth with a house and a garden'. In championing this suburban image, Menzies cast himself as the inheritor of a local tradition developed by the Nationalist chair of the State Bank of Victoria, Sir William McBeath, and Melbourne architects like Kingsley Henderson who had played an important role in founding the United Australia Party of which Menzies was now leader. For Menzies, who lived in a house designed by Henderson, the ideology of the garden suburb was particularly attractive. As leader of the opposition during the Second World War, he faced – as the Nationalist government had at the end of First World War – the problem of how a non-Labor party would win the peace. And, like his predecessors, he saw owning a suburban house and garden as a fail-safe way of giving people on modest incomes a stake (and a say) in the post-war nation. With his finely honed sense of tradition, Menzies would use the ideology of the garden suburb, created by Melbourne interwar architects, to build a new Liberal Party to cement the place of the suburbs in the national psyche.

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