



# BRISBANE BETWEEN THE WARS

EXCERPTED FROM AN ONLINE EXHIBITION BY FORMER FRYER STAFF MEMBER, LIBRARIAN JEFF RICKERTT, THIS ARTICLE EXPLORES SOME OF THE WAYS BRISBANE ARCHITECTURE REFLECTED POLITICAL, SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CHANGES DURING THE INTERWAR PERIOD.

After taking on a pilot near Cape Moreton, the Orient Line mail steamer slowly made its way across Moreton Bay and into the mouth of the Brisbane River. Its voyage had started in London and progressed via the Suez Canal to Ceylon and on to Australia, berthing at Fremantle, Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney. Brisbane was the end of the line. As the ship progressed upstream, one passenger stayed on deck and took in the view:

After passing Pinkenba, the character of the river banks improves. And we steam between high slopes on which are pleasantly dotted the charming suburban homes of the well-to-do citizens. Alongside the new wharf at Bulimba, on the waters of a wide and deep river, the ship makes fast, and her outward voyage is at an end.

After a brief excursion around the city, our observer recorded:

It is a busy city, but, of course, lacks the magnificence of the greater capitals. But with Queensland increasing in prosperity at its present pace, it may not be many years before Brisbane will vie with Sydney and Melbourne in importance.<sup>1</sup>

Eight years later, war and recession had dimmed the hopes of Brisbane's boosters. The city remained a quirky and limited provincial centre, with fewer than 210 000 people living within ten miles of the GPO.<sup>2</sup>

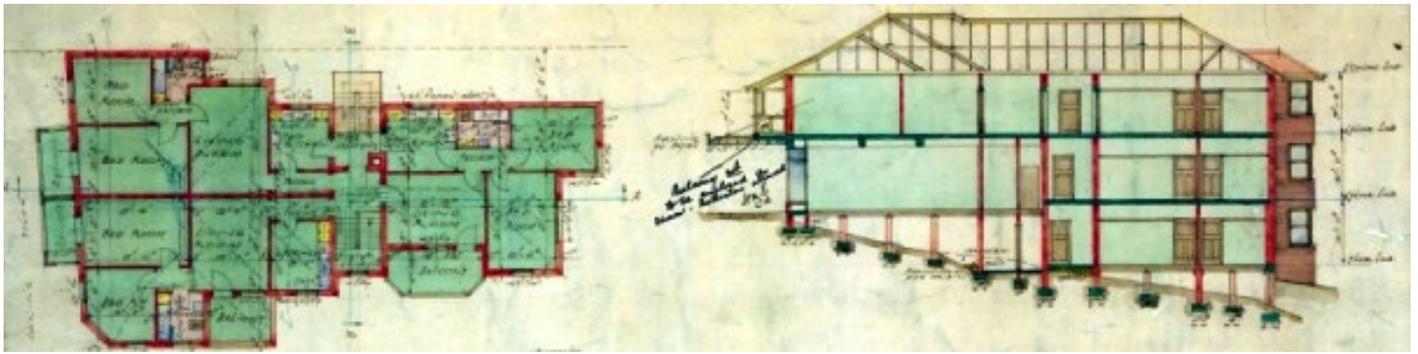
The economic and imperial considerations that influenced the decision to found the colony of New South Wales appear to have played no role in the founding of Brisbane. The settlement

was established in 1824 with one goal in mind: to create a secondary punishment centre for recalcitrant convicts. This narrowness of purpose, the brutality that came to be associated with it, and the settlement's administrative and economic subservience to Sydney, combined to discourage the emergence of an urban entrepreneurial class capable of shaping Brisbane into a strong centre for independent commerce and manufacturing. When significant economic development did occur, in the 1840s, it was led not by Brisbane capitalists, but by pastoralists pushing their flocks overland from New England to the Darling Downs.

Whereas Sydney and Melbourne produced an urban bourgeoisie with distinct interests and the political will to contest the dominance of the 'squattocracy', in Queensland, rural capital (initially pastoral, later mining and sugar) had no equivalent rivals.

Throughout the interwar period, Brisbane's development remained tied to rural commodity production in two fundamental ways. Firstly, it was a processing centre and port for southern Queensland's primary produce. Brisbane was also the commercial and administrative hub of rural industry for the entire state. Many Brisbane workers supported pastoralism, agriculture and mining in white collar roles.

Brisbane manufacturing, meanwhile, remained small by national standards. The larger factories were simply processing sites for primary commodities such as meat, sugar and timber. Manufacturing proper was limited to light industry producing consumer goods for the local market, especially clothes, processed foods, beverages and furniture.<sup>3</sup>



Although most Brisbanites did not grow prosperous under the sway of an economy dominated by mining, sugar and pastoralism, their city certainly expanded, especially in the 1920s. From an estimated population of 209 946 in 1921, Greater Brisbane was home to 284 758 people by 1929, and 325 890 by 1938.<sup>4</sup>

On 1 October 1925, nineteen municipalities within a ten-mile radius of the Brisbane GPO ceased to exist, replaced by a single authority: the Greater Brisbane Council (GBC). This had a profound impact on the city's development; growth between the wars would probably have occurred regardless, but orderly growth, accompanied by a systematic expansion of vital infrastructure, would simply not have been possible under the old system.

Unlike the growth spurt of the 1880s, interwar expansion did not markedly alter overall population density but led instead to greater suburbanisation. This was largely the result of improved transport systems and new town planning ordinances which raised the minimum area of residential allotments in new subdivisions from sixteen to twenty-four perches.<sup>5</sup> From 1925 to 1929, over 13 000 new dwellings were built.<sup>6</sup>

For coolness' sake, most of the houses are built of wood and possess wide verandas screened from the sun by straw blinds; they are raised high from the ground on piles, capped by inverted saucers to resist the depredations of the white ant, the bane of the settler in this and other parts of Australia.<sup>7</sup>

In this 1928 description, Kathleen Ussher captures some of the defining elements of the Queensland house: the use of tin and timber, the verandahs, the reliance on elevation to reduce heat and escape pests. Many of these features were not, of course, unique to Queensland.

Many of those new dwellings of the late twenties would have been villas, in the form of elevated timber and tin bungalows set amongst gardens. 'The many hills in and around Brisbane are dotted with villas and comfortable cottages'<sup>8</sup> observed Thiel in 1922. This bore out the predictions of John Dunmore Lang, who in 1851 had written 'there is no place I have ever seen in all our Australian colonies, with the single exception of Sydney, in which there is so great a number

of beautiful and interesting villa sites.'<sup>9</sup> The villa was a comparatively expansive and detached dwelling, and the gardens blended European flora with plants from the tropics, remnants of native vegetation, and vegetable plots and fruit trees from which householders stocked their larders. Hens, too were a common sight; a 1927 census turned up 141 000 of them.<sup>10</sup>

Other, introduced styles were modified to complement the local traditions. The Californian Bungalow, for instance, became popular in Australia in the 1920s, but the Queensland version was invariably an elevated, high-ceilinged dwelling constructed from timber and galvanized iron.<sup>11</sup>

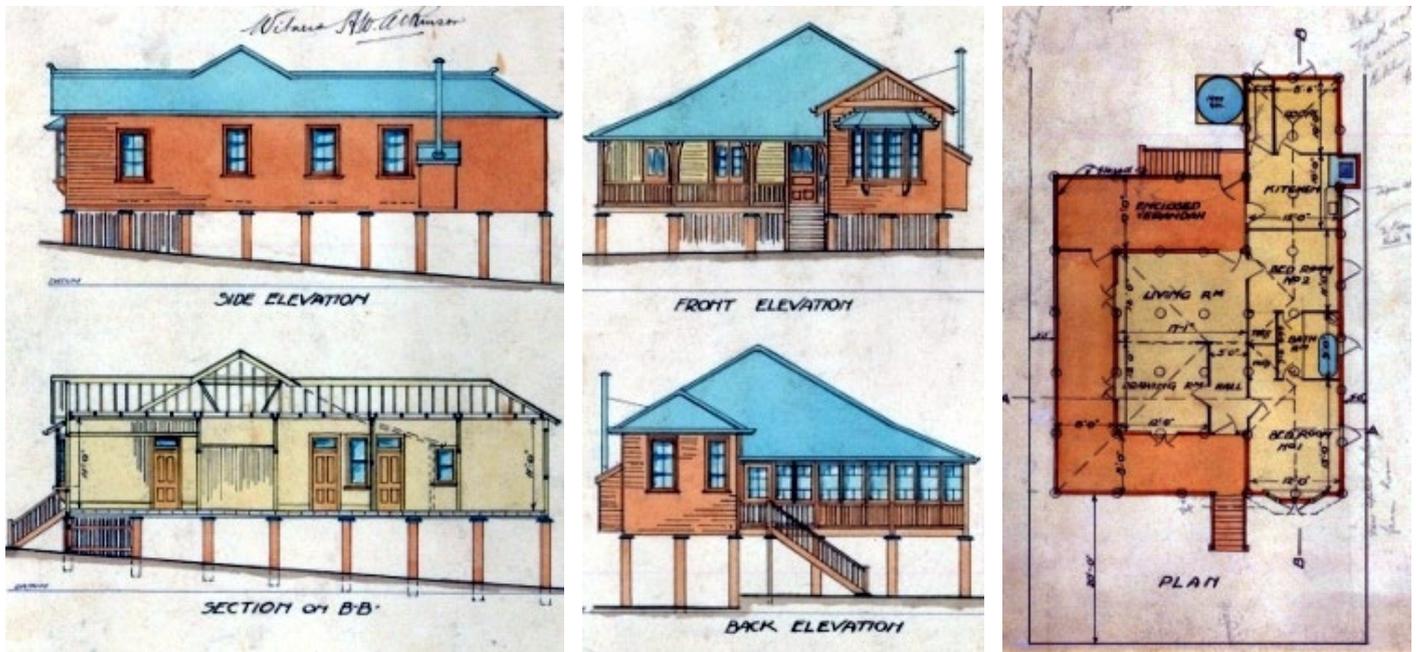
For Ussher, the reasons for the Queensland style lie principally in climate and construction costs. Balwant Saini, however, takes issue with this explanation. Though agreeing that the early wooden and iron bungalow was cheap and quick to build, he points out that the internal design of many of these homes prevented cross ventilation, while the thin wooden walls and iron roofs were far from ideal for heat proofing. In the summer months verandahs were often the only habitable spaces.<sup>12</sup> Europeans persisted with this inappropriate mode of shelter, he argues, because of their notion that a house should function as a barrier (rather than a filter) between its occupants and the outside environment.<sup>13</sup>

The sub-tropical and tropical bungalow, though, was not a fixed form. It evolved and features were incorporated to enhance climate control. Latticed screens and shutters were introduced to manage the effects of sun, wind and rain. Doorways were topped with fretwork panels and arches which were both decorative and facilitative of cross ventilation. In the twenties sash windows were replaced by casements which caught the breezes.

Most Europeans, moreover, readily accepted their verandahs and gardens as legitimate living spaces, despite the notional cultural barriers that separated them from nature. For its part, nature penetrated the sanctity of indoor life with impunity. 'You are on the threshold of the tropics,' noted Thomas Wood, 'and a little of the tropics comes over the threshold to meet you. None of the teeming, pulsating life of the East, not all its colours and its smells; but the heat and the fruits and the flowers, the velvety nights, the stars like

Above far left: Plans for Kedron residence, HW Atkinson & AH Conrad, 1924, UQFL228, Job 292, Fryer Library, The University of Queensland Library.

Above: Plans for shops and flats in Paddington, HW Atkinson & AH Conrad, 1938, UQFL228, Job 317, Fryer Library, The University of Queensland Library.



Above: Plans for a new house, New Farm, HW Atkinson & Chas McLay, 1914, UQFL228, Job 381, Fryer Library, The University of Queensland Library.

lamps in the sky.<sup>14</sup> The verandah became the point of mediation between these two worlds. Few Brisbane verandahs lacked a table and chairs for dining. The day bed and the 'sleepout' were common.

The interwar years heralded bigger stylistic changes as well.

From the late 1920s, homes of brick, concrete, fibro and tiles became more popular, partly because new construction techniques for brick veneer dwellings reduced the quantity of bricks required and therefore the cost. But the cost was still sufficiently high to prevent brick and tile challenging timber and tin as the preferred material of mass housing, particularly once economic depression set in.

In 1935 brick and tile dwellings purchased through the Queensland Government's home finance company, the State Advances Corporation, ranged in price from £750 to £1150, whereas the average price of the twenty-four timber designs on offer was £592, the cheapest being £360.<sup>15</sup>

The one housing sector where brick and masonry did make a significant impact was the new field of unit accommodation. Brisbane had had boarding houses and hotels since the nineteenth century, but the concept of multiple self-contained apartments in a single building dates from the 1930s, when changing attitudes to accommodation and the deleterious effect of the Depression rekindled interest in high-density, inner-city living.

Kangaroo Point, New Farm, Highgate Hill and Spring Hill were suburbs favoured by this form of development. Though timber structures remained ubiquitous, bricks and concrete supplied a new richness to Brisbane's architectural fabric.

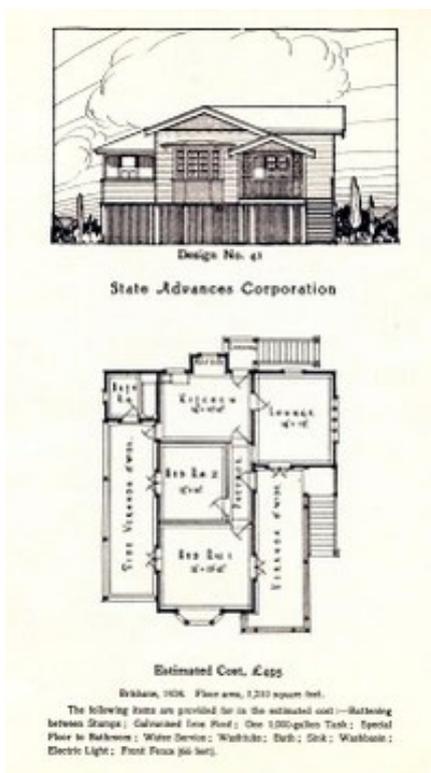
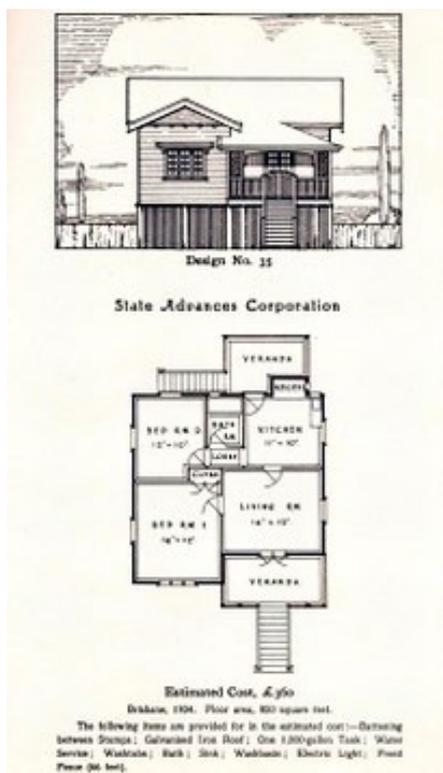
Freed from the decorative limitations of timber and its sub-tropical aesthetic, architects and

builders looked to new stylistic influences for inspiration. Many of the brick flats, houses, and commercial buildings erected in this era reveal a strong affinity with the international Art Deco and Modernist schools of design. Despite the depredations of progress Queensland-style, some examples of these can still be found.

In 1926, falling wool and mineral prices pushed Queensland into recession. The situation worsened in 1929 with the collapse of world stock markets. As the Australian economy plunged into crisis, the official national rate of unemployment reached 23 per cent in 1930, and rose to 28 per cent a year later.<sup>16</sup> Because of its smaller manufacturing base, Queensland rate of joblessness remained around ten per cent lower than the national average, but it was a catastrophe all the same.<sup>17</sup> Once workers on relief projects and ruined farmers were included in the tally, about 30 per cent of the Queensland workforce were out of work.

At the 1932 Premiers' Conference, Queensland's new Labor premier, William Forgan Smith, argued that 'a vigorous public works policy be adopted for the absorption of the unemployed'<sup>18</sup>. His government initiated a range of public works projects over the next few years, the most significant of which were the construction of the Story Bridge, the Somerset Dam, the Hornibrook Bridge, the deep water harbour at Mackay, and The University of Queensland's new site at St Lucia.<sup>19</sup>

In keeping with this approach, the Government assisted the Brisbane City Council to maintain a program of public works by providing subsidies and supporting the Council's efforts to raise loan funds.<sup>20</sup> As a result, many of Brisbane's unemployed found relief work in the construction of suburban infrastructure. Between 1934 and 1940, 44 miles of bitumen were laid and 86 miles of gravelled or metalled surfaces were added to the city's road network, mostly through the labour



of relief workers. Many suburbs were sewered by crews of the unemployed. From 1934 to 1937, 190.5 miles of sewers were built across the city and over 7000 houses were connected to the sewer system.<sup>21</sup>

Off the streets, the Depression produced visible changes as well. Due to falling incomes, house styles became simpler and more functional. As Rechner notes, 'rather than two or more gables with decorative infill, verandahs with broad columns, balustrades with cut-outs and windows with sunhoods, styles with low-pitched hip roofs and minimal decoration became predominant in the 1930s.'<sup>22</sup> But this was not a universal pattern. The State Advances Corporation continued to promote and sell a range of house styles to Queenslanders earning no more than £750 per annum. Even in the Depression year 1933-34, the Corporation found buyers for 15 865 of its homes statewide.<sup>23</sup>

For the minority of Brisbanites not unduly affected by the economic collapse, the combination of depressed prices and slashed wages presented an ideal opportunity to build homes of superior refinement and status. Thus, one legacy of the Depression was an even sharper class differentiation in the city's residential environment. The villas, hilltop and otherwise, continued to appear, and, for a fortunate few, Brisbane remained that 'sweet young city laughing in the sun.'

This article is excerpted from an online exhibition, *Brisbane between the wars: a history by design*, authored by former Fryer library staff member, librarian Jeff Rickertt. To view many more images, and more information, please visit [https://www.library.uq.edu.au/fryer/brisbane\\_bt/w/](https://www.library.uq.edu.au/fryer/brisbane_bt/w/)

## REFERENCES

1. *A voyage with the mails between Brisbane-London: Australia and Great Britain: a momento by an amateur photographer with 111 original photographs*, 4th edn, The London Stereoscopic Co, London, 1920
2. *Queensland Year Book*, 1939, p. 51
3. *ABC of Queensland Statistics*, 1929, p. 111.
4. *Queensland Year Book*, 1939, p. 51.
5. WA Jolly, *Greater Brisbane 1929*, Watson, Ferguson, Brisbane, 1929.
6. *ibid.*, p. 31.
7. K Ussher, *The cities of Australia*, Dent, London, 1928, p. 39.
8. FW Thiel, *Brisbane illustrated: business and pleasure*, FW Thiel, Brisbane, 1922, p. 1.
9. Quoted in CB Christesen, *Queensland journey*, PA Meehan, Brisbane, 1937, p. 14.
10. *ABC of Queensland Statistics*, 1929, p. 110.
11. JG Rechner, *Brisbane house styles 1880 to 1940: a guide to the affordable house*, Brisbane History Group, Kelvin Grove, 1998, p. 3.
12. B Saini & R Joyce, *The Australian house: homes of the tropical north*, Lansdowne, Sydney, 1982, pp. 16-20.
13. *ibid.*, p. 1.
14. Quoted in CB Christesen, *Queensland journey*, p. 15.
15. State Advances Corporation, *Designs of dwellings*, State Advances Corporation, Brisbane, 1935.
16. S Macintyre, *A concise history of Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 2004, p. 178.
17. R Evans, *A history of Queensland*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 2007, p. 180.
18. Quoted in Brian Costar, 'Labor, Politics and Unemployment: Queensland During the Great Depression', PhD Thesis, University of Queensland, 1981, p. 213.
19. *ibid.*, pp. 223-4.
20. *Brisbane 1859-1959: a history of local government*, ed. Gordon Greenwood, Council of the City of Brisbane, Brisbane, 1959, p. 503.
21. *ibid.*, p. 506.
22. JG Rechner, *Brisbane house styles 1880 to 1940: a guide to the affordable house*, Brisbane History Group, Brisbane, 1988, p. 4.
23. *Queensland Year Book*, 1939, p. 318.

Above (l-r): State Advances Corporation design (no.35, no.41 and no.63), 1935, NA7470.Q4S93, Fryer Library, The University of Queensland Library.