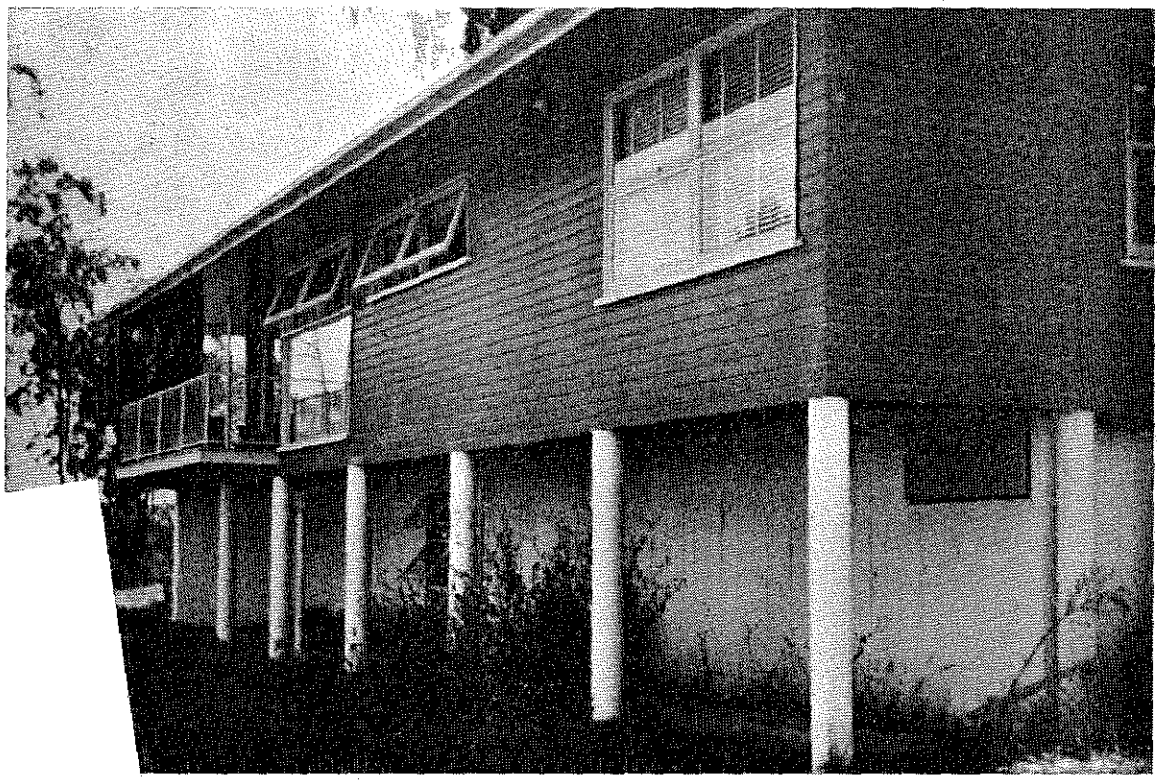


Home of E. J. Hayes, Architect, St. Lucia.

ST. LUCIA

A Housing Revolution is Taking Place in Brisbane

BY ROBIN BOYD, A.R.A.I.A., AND PETER NEWELL, A.R.A.I.A.

One of the housing phenomena of the post-war period is the revolution which has occurred three miles west of Brisbane in the suburb of St. Lucia. Here, for good or bad, the north Australian vernacular — stilts, creosote and iron—is dying. Most of the homes speak with a southern accent.

There are many of them. The area is alive with the noises of building. High, richly wooded and unexploited, it attracted the majority of Brisbane's young architects after the war. Now most imaginative home-builders of Brisbane seem to be following them. Many of these residential sites survey a wide stretch of the twisting, picturesque Brisbane River. Blocks which would turn the intending home-builders of Sydney or Melbourne cream and green with envy sell for a very few hundred pounds. There are two classes of house here. The popular form has adopted the current southern idiom: hipped tile roof, corner windows. The other, directed by most of Brisbane's leading young architects, is clearly seeking answers to Brisbane's special building problems without reference to stylistic precedent.

Looking back into Queensland's building tradition for first principles, these architects had first to resolve the problem of the high stilts. Why were they as inevitable a part of the house as a chimney was in Hobart?

A Tradition Starts

The earliest colonial houses had been based on the style established some twenty-five years earlier in Sydney. Low, wide, shaded stone houses; shutters and fanlights lightly carved in the Georgian manner. Later, when the river flats were developed by small farmers, there was an abundant supply of some of the longest, straightest, best building timber in Australia. What was more reasonable than to raise the houses on tall strong stumps? Without extra expense, they would (1) be above flood danger, (2) have valuable sub-floor storage space, (3) be safeguarded against white ants, whose activities now could be observed, (4) have laundry, workshop, showers, and casual living space in a breezy, shaded ground floor.

There were sufficient causes to start the idiom. The reasons given by most builders for maintaining it are less convincing. It is often said that the air circulation allowed under the house cools the rooms, but the C.E.B.S. recently discredited this theory. In any case, the unventilated galvanised iron roofs are inconsistent with the principle. In point of fact, few builders in 1950 can say why they raise their houses. They are surprised that one should ask

the question. The alternative, known as a "southern-low-to-the-ground-type house", is considered a luxury unbecoming a working man's town.

A Tradition Matures

Brisbane is not a wealthy city. The profits from most of its commercial and industrial enterprises go back to the southern capitals which sponsor them. There is no class of rich merchants and industrialists comparable with those of Sydney or Melbourne, out to impress the neighbourhood with the scale and magnificence of their houses. With few exceptions, doctors are the highest earners and the builders of the best houses. Even they are inclined to spend more on cars and yachts than they spend on their houses. The builders are mostly carpenters with one or two offsiders with little knowledge of building construction outside the limited traditions of their trade.

A climate which encourages year-round outdoor activities has reduced the house to a comparatively insignificant rôle in society. Home entertainment is not developed. Nobody is interested in the way the up-and-coming young man lives, but everyone is impressed by the length of his yacht.

There has been no great stimulus to question the stilts or to enter with any gusto the southern fashion race. The architect has been retained for a much smaller proportion of houses than in southern cities. The few pre-war brick homes in fashionable Ascot were the work of architects trained in Sydney or Melbourne, whose southern ways were greeted with the enthusiasm of a robust native tribe for a Quaker missionary.

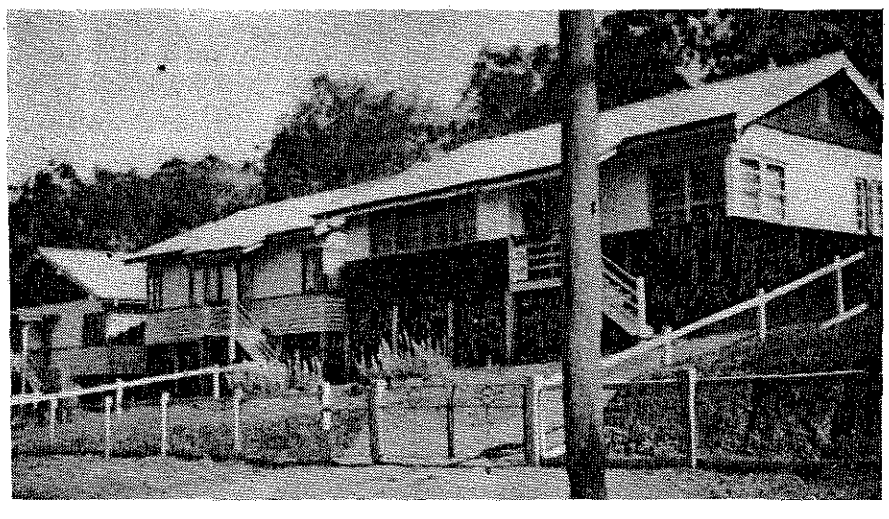
Typical of Dods' Brisbane suburban work, pre-World War I.

Only one architect of note tried to create stylistic elegance within the framework of the Brisbane vernacular. He was a Brisbane boy.

In the early 1860's Robin S. Dods, aged four, arrived in Brisbane with his Australian mother and New Zealander father. He was educated in Brisbane, Switzerland and Scotland. He served articles in London and spent the early years of practice passing between Britain and Brisbane. Success in a competition for the Nurses' Home at Brisbane Hospital finally held him here. He stayed on till 1913 to build it and some offices and churches and the several houses by which he is best remembered. They were big, generous homes in the traditional elevated, verandah-ringed form and of the traditional light frame construction. They broke tradition in their comparatively high roof and in their details. These were American Colonial in flavour (Dods' wife was American) but stylism was carefully disciplined by climatic considerations. He provided the big roof spaces with various forms of efficient ventilators and developed the use of adjustable vertical wood louvres to fit between the balustrade and eaves on the verandah edge.

He once described the climate as being "so mild that almost any shelter will suffice". Others may believe it is hotter than that, but they find they can always cool off in a Dods house.

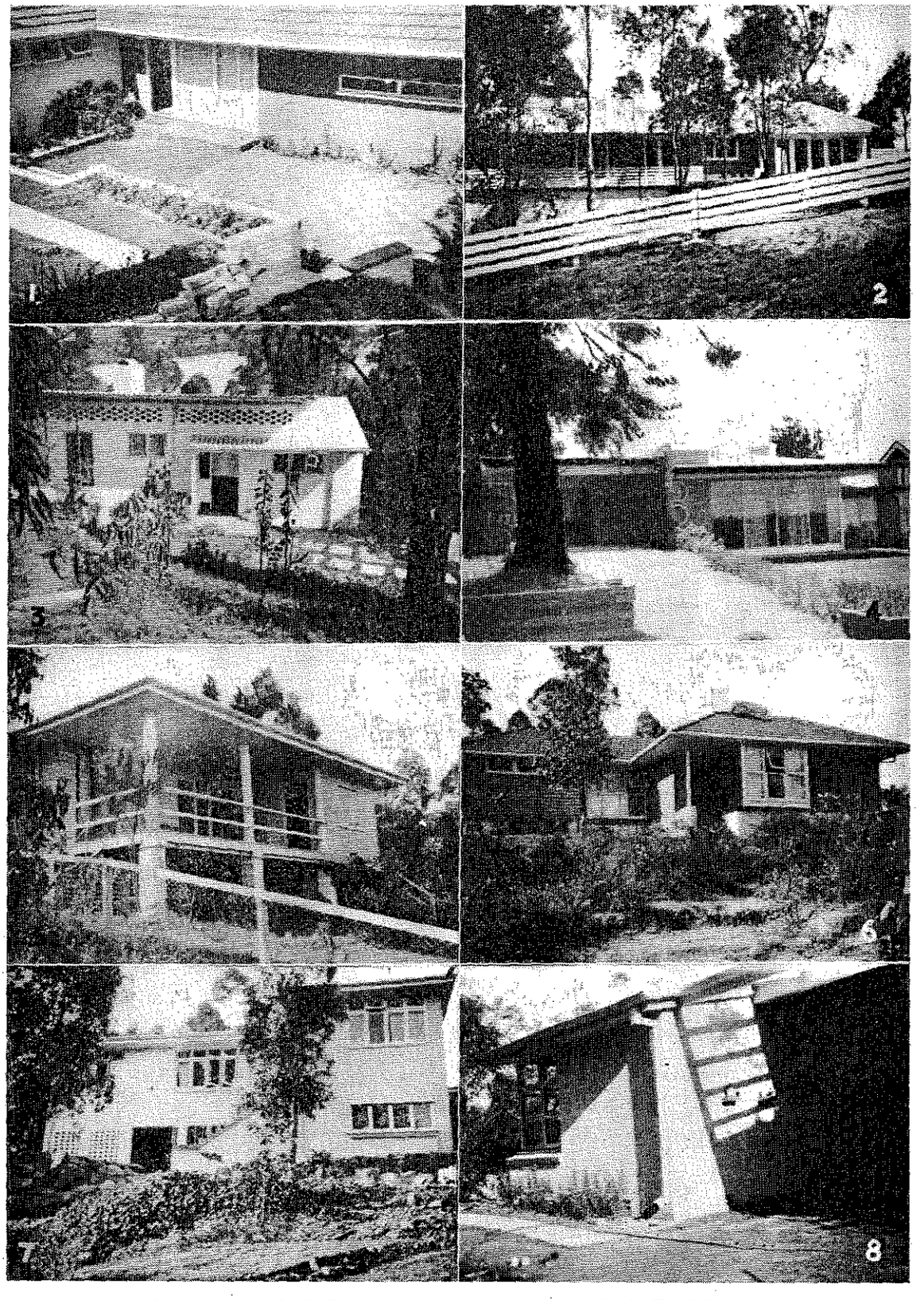
1950 Brisbane official vernacular.



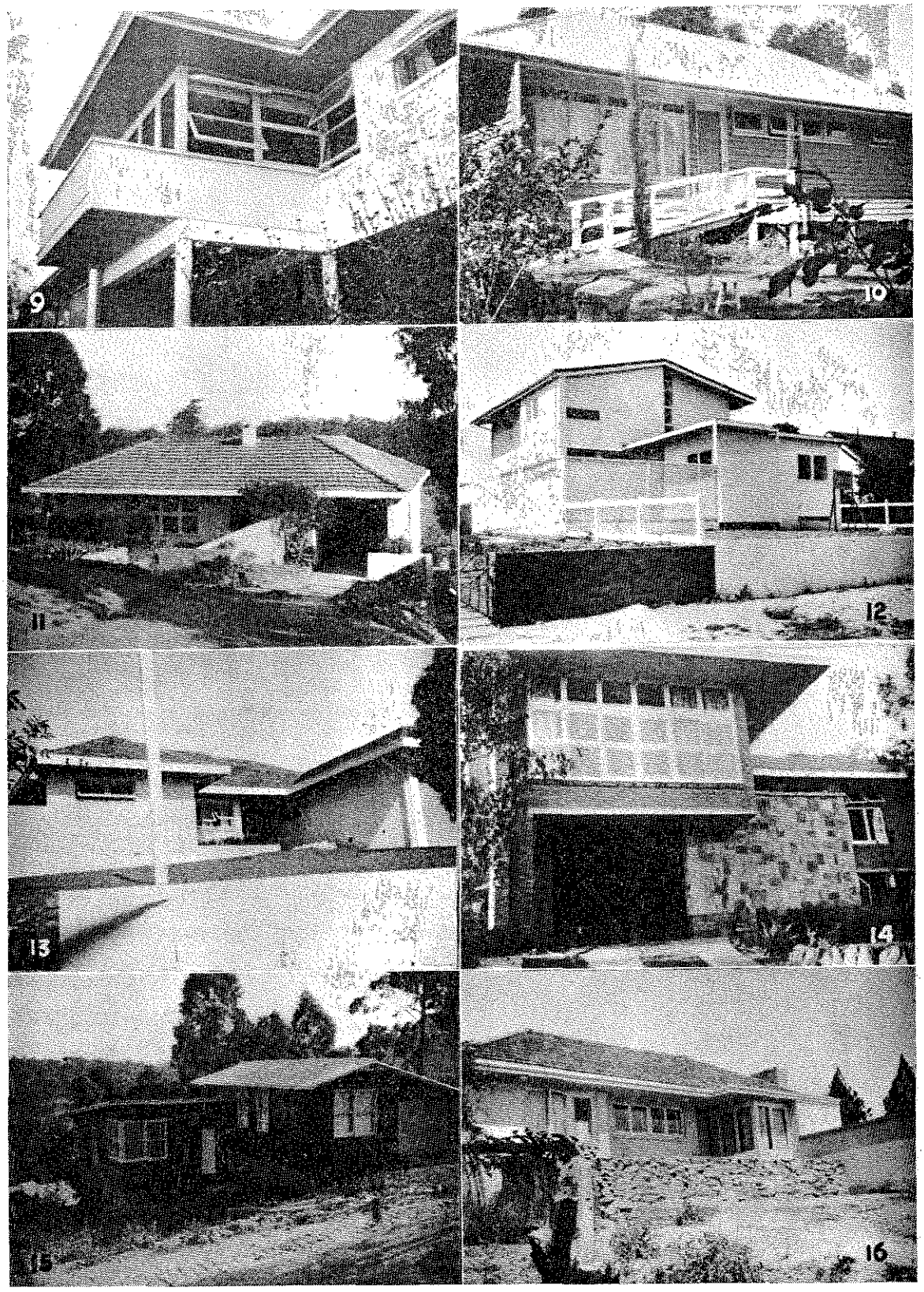
Tradition in Jeopardy

The traditional stilted form is maintained today by the majority of builder-designers and by the housing authorities. But more people are learning the southern suburban game of competitive house-proudness. The L-shape and the corner window are acquiring new devotees every day. The Queenslander's house ignorance and carelessness are being replaced by neighbourhood rivalry and, inevitably, ostentation.

(Continued on page 114.)



Architects: 1. E. J. Hayes (A.) (own house). 2. F. C. W. Salmon (A.). 3. John Butler, A.R.I.B.A. (A.) (own house). 4. V. Gzell (A.) (own house). 5. Karl Langer (F.). 6. E. J. Hayes (A.) and C. R. Scott (A.). 7 and 8. P. E. Newell (A.) (own house).



Architects: 9 and 10. Hayes and Scott. 11. G. D. Banfield. 12. Hayes and Scott. 13. Chambers and Ford. 14. D. B. Bell (A.). 15. Architects' Group. 16. G. D. Banfield.

ST. LUCIA

(Continued from page 107.)

This change of attitude leads to the two classes of building found in St. Lucia. With the drab colour and thoughtless habits of the traditional house has gone its best feature: lightness of frame.[1]

A timber tradition has existed because, as well as being plentiful and cheap, wood presented no great fire hazard in a country where the summer was the wet season. Brick is now more widely used because there is more money about, because it reduces maintenance cost during the long amortisation period of post-war low-interest loans and because the quality and quantity of Queensland's once-rich timbers are falling fast.

Seekers of Australiana have already rejoiced in the distinctive Queensland vernacular. There were many who believed that it would one day lead to an advanced architectural idiom of which all Australia could be proud. With its brise-soleil verandah devices and floating floor, it seemed naturally to point to a Corbu-style development in popular house design. But the functional basis of the stilt has appeared too confused to Brisbane's more progressive architects. Many of them prefer to drop the house and to fight the heat and termites with other weapons. Some, on the commonly sloping land, are developing the traditional form with concrete piers and partially enclosed ground floor utility sections.

The full expression of the new idiom is being prevented by regulations, framed by men of the tradition, which innocently discourage indoor-outdoor planning. When calculating house area for a building permit, unroofed terraces "connected with the house" and eaves exceeding three feet projection must be computed as floor area. On the other hand, open sub-floor space is not read as extra floor area. If these restrictions were lifted, most of the new school of architects would undoubtedly let their houses grow broad living porches, wide eaves and, the incentive to provide for sub-floor space removed, would allow their houses to subside to the ground. In this form and position they would be fundamentally similar to the homesteads with which the State began.

The North Australian traditional vernacular, disparaged today by scientist and stylist alike, is living numbered days in Brisbane. The stylist's reaction to it is unlikely to lead to anything more significant than uncomfortably hot, ill-ventilated interiors. The scientific reaction may lead to a genuinely free and forthright architecture which could grow under this warm sun more rapidly and vigorously than anywhere else in Australia.

---

[1] Internal partitions are traditionally one-inch tongue and grooved vertical pine boards, exposed each side, held by skirting and picture rails and an intermediate belt rail.