



## CONFERENCE PAPER

# “THE WORST DISASTER”<sup>1</sup> EVER TO BLIGHT MELBOURNE’S RESIDENTIAL LANDSCAPE.

SIX-PACK FLATS, RHETORIC, AND THE STIGMATISATION OF AN IMPORTANT URBAN HOUSING TYPOLOGY IN POST-WAR MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA.

Affordable Housing  
Hallmark Research Initiative

**Catherine Townsend**, Investigator ‘Post-war Medium Density Housing: Design and Social Precedents for Contemporary Melbourne’ Affordable Housing Hallmark Research Initiative, Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning

**Professor Alan Pert**, Initiative Chair and Lens Leader, Affordable Housing Hallmark Research Initiative, Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning

Conference Paper presented at **The Terms of Habitation: Re-theorizing the Architecture of Housing Conference, Israel Institute for Advanced Studies, 2020.**



### ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the rhetoric used to stigmatise the six-pack apartment typology in Melbourne, Australia showing genuine criticism to apply only to a sub-group of the type. Vilified by many different groups for decades, six-pack apartments were a conspicuous form of privately developed affordable infill housing that emerged from the regulatory and economic conditions of post-war Melbourne. Six-packs, originally known as own-your-own flats, are brick two to three-storey walk-up flats, often raised on piloti to provide car-parking. They frequently used futurist details, materials and colour to create visual interest. The development of the six-packs was closely associated with the Jewish community that burgeoned in Melbourne in the post-war years; and many were designed by émigré architects who had first-hand knowledge of modern European housing experiments in the inter-war years.

The meanest of the six-pack type were cramped, with little access to sunlight and open space, they overlooked and overshadowed their neighbours, and were dominated by car-parking. Yet, our investigations show that many six-pack apartments transcend this criticism and the type has provided spacious, light-filled, affordable accommodation in transport and job-rich locations across inner and middle Melbourne from the post-war long boom to the current day. The current Victorian State Government aims to significantly increase housing density in the middle suburbs as Melbourne is currently experiencing rapid population growth. In light of these conditions, a deeper understanding of a typology that historically addressed this issue is timely.

### SUGGESTED CITATION

Townsend, C. and Pert, A. ““The worst disaster” ever to blight Melbourne’s residential landscape. Six-pack flats, rhetoric, and the stigmatisation of an important urban housing typology in post-war Melbourne, Australia.” Conference paper presented at IAS Research Group Conference, The Terms of Habitation: Re-theorizing the Architecture of Housing, November 2020. Available from The University of Melbourne, Hallmark Research Initiative for Affordable Housing: <https://research.unimelb.edu.au/research-at-melbourne/multidisciplinary-research/hallmark-research-initiatives/affordable-housing>

[affordable-housing@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:affordable-housing@unimelb.edu.au)

**AFFORDABLE  
HOUSING  
HALLMARK**

## PAPER

This paper investigates the rhetoric used to stigmatise the six-pack apartment typology in Melbourne, Australia showing genuine criticism to apply only to a sub-group of the type. Vilified by many different groups for decades, the six-pack apartments were a conspicuous form of privately developed affordable infill housing that emerged from the regulatory and economic conditions of post-war Melbourne. Six-packs, originally known as own-your-own flats, are brick two to three-storey walk-up flats, often raised on piloti to provide car-parking. They frequently used featurist details, materials and colour to create visual interest. The development of the six-packs was closely associated with the Jewish community that burgeoned in Melbourne in the post-war years; and many were designed by émigré architects who had first-hand knowledge of modern European housing experiments in the inter-war years.

The meanest of the six-pack type were cramped, with little access to sunlight and open space, they overlooked and overshadowed their neighbours, and were dominated by car-parking. Yet, our investigations show that many six-pack apartments transcend this criticism and the type has provided spacious, light-filled, affordable accommodation in transport and job-rich locations across inner and middle Melbourne from the post-war long boom to the current day. The current Victorian State Government aims to significantly increase housing density in the middle suburbs as Melbourne is currently experiencing rapid population growth. In light of these conditions, a deeper understanding of a typology that historically addressed this issue is timely.

Our paper first considers the closest corollary to the six-pack, the Los Angeles dingbat. The dingbat is the best documented privately-developed affordable apartment typology that arose in the post-war era. We compare the criticism of the two apartment typologies, and show that the disproportionate criticism of the six-pack arose in part due to its troubled position within the prevalent Australian suburban dream of single-house ownership. We show how the typology's development was entangled with Melbourne's political and statutory conditions, and then discuss rhetorical positions from which the six-pack was criticised. To demonstrate the limitations of these criticisms we examine positive examples of the six-pack typology. We conclude by discussing the type's continued suitability for infill housing in contemporary Melbourne.

Writing in their introduction to *Dingbat 2.0*, 2016 Thurman Grant and Joshua Stein describe this typology as "Praised and vilified in equal measure, dingbat apartments were a critical enabler of Los Angeles' rapid postwar urban expansion."<sup>1</sup> Grant and Stein point to the dingbat as an inexpensive, two-storey walk-up apartment, developed by "mom and pop developers," its form "ruthlessly efficient" at maximising the number of occupants and car-spaces, a stucco box whose size was determined by parking and zoning regulations.<sup>2</sup> Built from the 1950s, but extinct by the 1970s, the dingbat's key aesthetic constituents are tuck-under parking; stucco facades decorated with aspirational names in elaborate type-faces, atomic starbursts, and other modish symbols. The six-pack and the dingbat both originated as infill typologies and were similarly criticised for the negative effect their large forms and car parks had on the urban fabric of streets previously consisting solely of detached houses.



Suburban Flats, Kurt Veld in *Look Here! Considering the Australian Environment*, ed. John Button 1968. Image permission courtesy of Atlanta Veld.

Despite these criticisms the dingbat was swiftly and enthusiastically embraced within art and popular culture, and ultimately came to be considered an iconic place in which to embark on the American Dream of upward mobility. The typology was constructed amongst the glamour and hedonism of Los Angeles as the city cemented its position as an important centre of art. Amid the artistic shift from the profundity of abstract-expressionism to the bold, aggressive, and impersonal American Pop-Art it is hardly surprising that the typology was central to Ed Ruscha's early art photography publication *Some Los Angeles Apartments* in 1965. This interest in photographing the dingbat was continued by Judy Fiskin in the early 1980s, Lesley Marlene Siegel in the 1990s, and then cinematically in the *Slums of Beverly Hills*, 1998. Obviously this speaks of the primacy of art and popular culture in Los Angeles, but even more so it speaks of the fondness Angelenos, Americans and others have for the dingbat. Architectural critic and historian Reyner Banham, wrote the first critical consideration of the dingbat in *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, 1971, his extended love-letter to that city. In this text Banham is consumed by the emotional power of both Los Angeles and the dingbat. He demonstrates the dingbat to be an important symbol of the American Dream, a place to live in after moving to the West Coast reinventing oneself and start anew.<sup>3</sup>

Conversely the six-pack's relationship with the Australian Dream, an ethos dominated by the notion of owning one's own detached suburban dwelling, has always been a troubled one. With the notable exception of Howard Arkley's paintings of six-pack apartments, this typology's relationship with Melbourne artists has solely been one of habitation. Historians Graeme Davison and Richard White have both shown the centrality of owning a detached suburban house for both the psyche of the Australian nation, and government policy.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, in the post war period the Commonwealth Government published the *Official Commemorative Book: Jubilee of the Commonwealth of Australia* stating "What the Australian cherishes most is a home of his own, a garden where he can potter and a motor car... as soon as he can buy a house and a garden he ... moves to the suburbs."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, in the post-war period it was genuinely assumed to be contrary to the Australian way of life to dwell in an apartment. Government legislation and finance similarly revolved around promoting and supporting the ownership of the detached house.

Urban infrastructure, regulatory, and financial conditions in Australia have been organised almost exclusively for the single detached house since colonisation. As Miles Lewis shows in 'The Quarter Acre Block', since 1837 Melbourne's land has been surveyed into allotments sized for the detached house surrounded by garden.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, Melbourne's street network and services have all been designed to provision the detached house. The Uniform Building Regulations adopted in



Dingbat apartment, Los Angeles. Photograph: James Rafferty.

Melbourne in 1945 did allow for apartments to be built; but their substantial open space requirements meant it was rarely economic to build compliant flats. Local councils who wished to support the development of flats could nullify the UBR with their own by-laws under the Local Government Act.<sup>7</sup> In practice this led to most councils excluding flats, and the few who permitted them formulated their own requirements. Beyond these geographic impediments, the legal system, for the most part, prevented ownership of individual flats until the 1960s, nor would banks or co-operatives finance the purchase of single units until that time. It was only when the State Government, in the face of continued housing shortages, altered these legal and financial conditions that a significant number of own-your-own flats were constructed. Indeed, the regulatory changes led to an apartment boom. The UBRs were not simultaneously amended: thus, the occasional corrupt surveyor, or council, meant that some of the meanest apartments were particularly dire both for inhabitants and neighbours, and it is on these grounds that criticism of the typology persists.<sup>8</sup>

One of the earliest criticisms of the six-pack was that flats encouraged immorality, a pervasive belief that lingered in Australia well into the 1970s. This view and the belief that flats were the antithesis of the Australian Dream were the dominant contemporaneous critiques of the typology. Further critiques came from an entirely different vantage point that of progressive cultural commentators such as Australia's most prominent architecture critic of the time Robin Boyd. For the most part

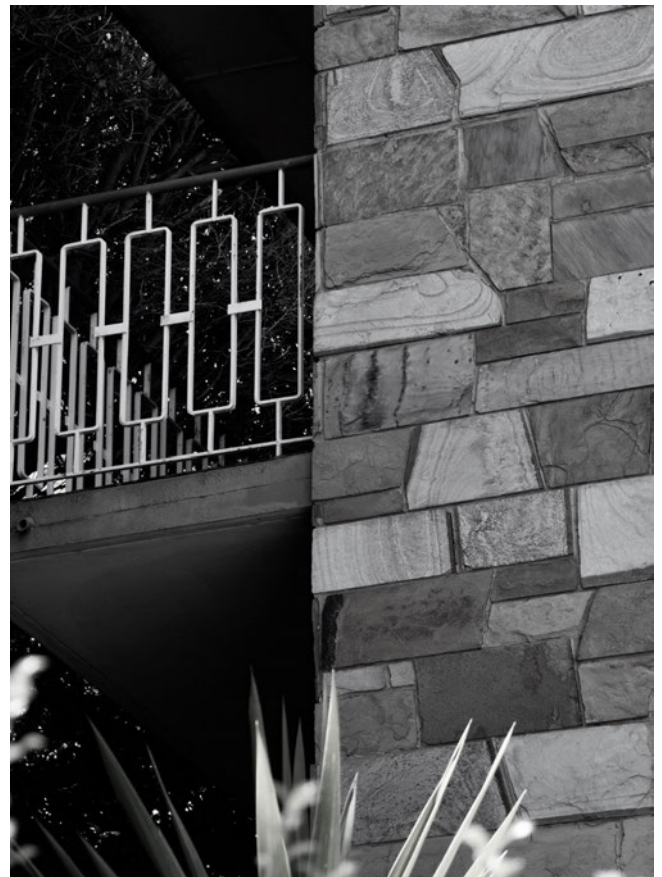
Boyd focused his criticism on the aesthetics of the six-packs railing against their 'crass vulgarity' and featurism as well as their deleterious effect on neighbourhoods 'blocks of flats line the footpath crowding out each other and crowding out any trees or greenery or any open space.'<sup>9</sup> Boyd described them in 1968 and 1970 as 'the most dispiriting kind of dwelling that has ever been devised by man – the small, three-storey walk-up block of flats in its concrete car-park non-garden'<sup>10</sup> It was only in the final years of Boyd's life that he began to address the structural conditions creating the six-pack: recognising, as Miles Lewis writes, that the flats were the "logical product of the conditions of the time."<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless Boyd and later day commentators overlook that none of these limitations precluded the construction of higher quality apartments and that amongst the typology many fine buildings were constructed.

Not all six-packs were small and cramped, indeed some are best described as luxurious. The Kluska flats, 1963, 55 Wanda Rd Caulfield North designed by Viennese architect Ernest Fooks were large well-lit floor apartments. There is little that separates the street frontage of these apartments and a large house with a double garage. They sit in a generous sized garden and each take up an entire floor.

Many 6-packs were intelligent morphological responses to their sites such as another affluent development *Fountain Court*, 70 Orrong Crescent, Caulfield North designed by Polish architects Holgar & Holgar 1967-68. These three-storey flats raised on piloti form an elongated concave curve that allows each apartment to have a view and balcony, and maximises sunlight from the north and east on the difficult convex shaped site.



**Kluska flats, 1963, 55 Wanda Rd Caulfield North, Ernest Fooks. Photograph: Theo Blankley.**



**Details of suburban flats in Glen Eira. Photograph: Theo Blankley.**

Sunlight and cross ventilation were well considered in many 6-packs such as 5 Herbert St., St. Kilda by Ernest Fooks in 1959. In these apartments Fooks articulates the floorplate such that each apartment has northern sunlight and a view of the St Kilda Botanic Gardens to the east. These flats, like all those we discuss today are designed to enable cross ventilation.

Each of the four apartments in Viennese architect Kurt Popper's 1968 six-pack at 68 Howitt Rd has windows to its four sides. The generously sized apartments, built of orange and decorative bricks each have balconies and are set amid generous garden space. Car parking and storage is tucked underneath the building.

The disposition of car parking is perhaps the most critical element in determining the success of apartment design, especially in blocks with greater numbers of flats. 21 Tiuna Grove, Elwood is a block of 18 two-bedroom apartments each with two on-site car-spaces. This feat is managed by raising the courtyard shaped block on piloti and carefully landscaping the site that includes space for outdoor dining. Another solution is where the apartment block gives over one aspect to car-parking and provides ample green space to another. 9 Dickins St Elwood is such an example with 17 one and two bedroom apartments each with a garage on the south-western side of the block. The north-eastern aspect is set amid a generous sized garden to which each apartment has a balcony.

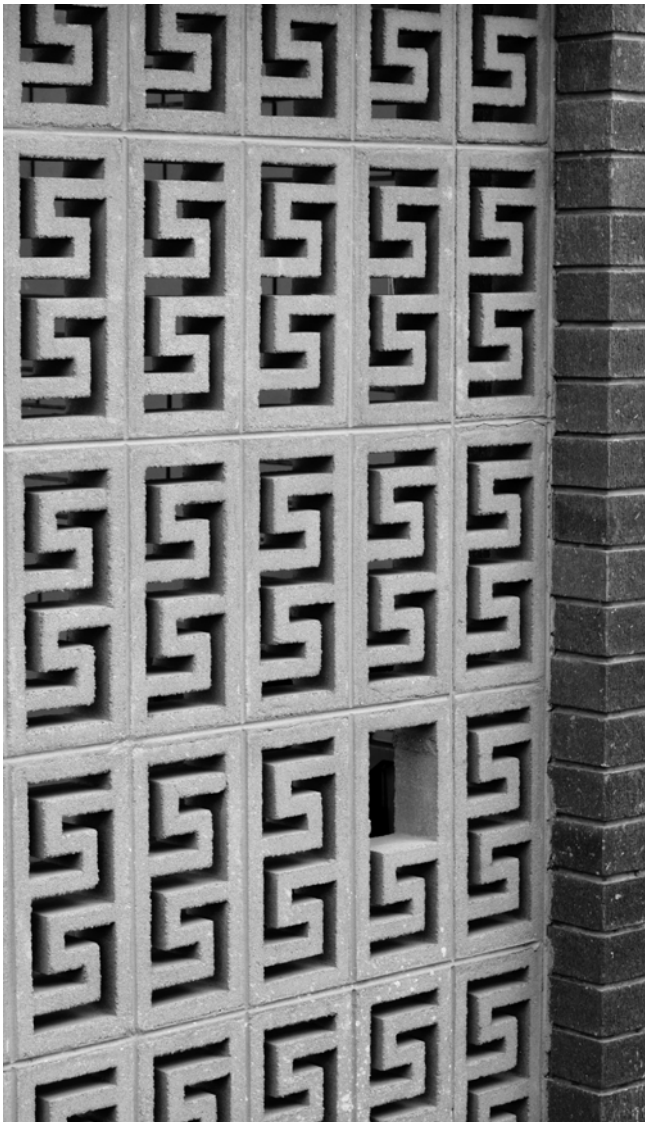
Despite the weight of negative rhetoric and multitude of structural impediments the six-pack typology was hugely successful: they still number in the hundreds of thousands. Their demise was caused by the credit squeeze of the 1970s and alterations to building regulations that made it even more difficult to construct apartments. They filled a gap in Melbourne's housing market and still provide affordable accommodation for young adults, migrants and low and medium-income families in transport and job-rich locations across inner and middle Melbourne. We have shown that while there were six-pack apartments worthy of criticism, the best examples are positive models for the difficult task of increasing housing density in the middle suburbs within urban infrastructure structured for the detached house. The Victorian State Government's believes it is imperative to increase housing density in the middle suburbs given Melbourne's the rapid population growth. We call for further study and understanding of the six-pack typology to delineate for contemporary designers and builders the most advantageous architectural solutions for medium-density housing in Melbourne.



Details of suburban flats in Glen Eira. Photograph: Theo Blankley.

## Endnotes

- 1 Joshua Stein, Thurman Grant and Kelly Blair, "MAS Context Fall Talks 2016 Dingbat 2.0: The iconic Los Angeles Apartment as Projection of a Metropolis," accessed September 14, 2020, <https://www.mascontext.com/events/mas-context-fall-talks-2016/dingbat-2-0-the-iconic-los-angeles-apartment-as-projection-of-a-metropolis/>
- 2 Stein, Grant, Blair, "Dingbat 2.0."
- 3 Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: Architecture of Four Ecologies*, (New York: Harper & Row, 2001 ed).
- 4 Graeme Davison, "The Past and Future of the Australian Suburb." Canberra, ACT, Australia: Urban Research Program, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, 1993.  
  
Richard White, *Inventing Australia: images and identity 1688-1980* (Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1981).
- 5 Emery Barcs, "The Australian Way of Life," in Official Commemorative Book: Jubilee of the Commonwealth of Australia, ed. O.L. Ziegler (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1951), 42.
- 6 Miles Lewis, *Suburban Backlash. The Battle for the world's most liveable city* (Hawthorn, Victoria: Bloomings Books, 1999) 61-76.
- 7 Lewis, *Suburban Backlash*, 141. John Paterson, David Yencken & Graham Gunn, *A Mansion or No House: a report for UDIA on consequences of planning standards and their impact on land housing* (Melbourne: Hawthorn Press, 1976) 11.
- 8 Lewis, *Suburban Backlash*, 141.
- 9 Robin Boyd, 'The Nineteen-sixties in Focus,' in *Look Here! Considering the Australian Environment*, ed. John Button (Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire, 1968), 33.
- 10 Robin Boyd, *Australia's Home* 2nd ed (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 1968). Boyd repeats this quote verbatim in "Architecture in the doldrum. Big city with little ideas," *The Age*, October 20, 1970, 8. `
- 11 Lewis, *Suburban Backlash*, 91 commenting on Robin Boyd, *Artificial Australia* [Boyer Lectures 1967] (no place 1967) 25.
- 12 Miles Lewis quoted in Jenny Brown, "A look back at where it all began," *The Age*, September 2, 2010.



Details of suburban flats in Glen Eira. Photograph: Theo Blankley.