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## ON THE VERANDAH

'In Australia verandahs are as Australian as kangaroos.'<sup>1</sup> Hard to believe now when one sees the enormous, verandah-less, cement monstrosities that are being built on suburban blocks!

But, certainly the houses I knew or grew up in, in country Victoria, had at least two verandahs. Indeed my grandfather's house was almost surrounded by verandah. It was held up by big brick pillars which were very good for climbing and jumping from. They were also wonderful to look at, in my child's view, with their air of strength and prosperity. Our photo albums are full of verandah photos - groups draped around verandah posts or standing on the steps, babies on shawls or in big, old prams. Generations of verandah photos!

Our home at Shepparton East was originally built with four verandahs but it became a house of diminishing verandahs as the family grew. The side verandah was enclosed for a boys' bedroom, the back one was enclosed to keep out the weather and the dog, and one of the front verandahs was eventually built in for another bedroom; so our house ended up with walls of louvre windows to let in air and light. Fortunately all had fly-wire screens as well because flies love country Australia in the summer, particularly if the neighbour across the road has pigs. I can remember the wall of our remaining front verandah being black with flies in summer. Flies, like cockroaches, must be great survivors. Orchard sprays didn't seem to decrease their numbers and pigs certainly increased them. Paper wasps sometimes built their nests under our verandahs, too. Dad used to burn them down with a lighted newspaper. I was always relieved when the operation was completed as I had visions of more than the wasps' houses going up in flames.

The front verandahs were kept free and tidy except for a canvas deck chair or two but the back verandah was a most essential part of the house. Here was the little cupboard where we cleaned our shoes and the place for storing gum boots so the mud wouldn't be tramped inside. Here was the table for dampening down the clothes when they were brought in bone dry and freshly smelling from the line. There was a clothes line stretched across the back verandah for wet day use, chairs where peas could be podded and sometimes even a box or two of fruit. I was given a new bike when I went to high school and, as it was one of my prize possessions, I always housed it on the back verandah out of the weather each night, as well. Bikes and boots and tables and washing! Yet I never thought of the back verandah as cluttered. It was just the back verandah and its job was to be multi-functional.

Verandahs had an environmental purpose, of course. In a newspaper article I read the other day Richard Johnson, one of Sydney's eminent architects, is quoted thus: 'Two icons of Australian architecture, the Paddington terrace and the colonial farmhouse

are shining examples of what we now call sustainable design and building practice.<sup>12</sup> The article bears this out by going on to describe Dundullimal homestead near Dubbo. Here the verandah on the northern side is extensive, wide and low-pitched. 'A lot of visitors see how low the roof is and have the misconception that the settlers were short. They weren't. The whole idea of the low roof on this side of the house is to allow the winter sun in while keeping the summer sun out.'<sup>13</sup> Certainly, when our front verandah at Shepparton East was made into a spare bedroom, it was to be hoped that the visitors came in the winter. It was a bit too hot for summer comfort with no protecting eaves and facing the north. In addition to the verandahs at Dundullimal the original owner, John Maughan, who'd lived in the heat of India, 'broadened the interior corridors to improve air flow and plastered the interior walls for insulation. In the sitting room there were three windows on the eastern wall and none on the western. On the other hand, the fireplaces tended to be placed on the western walls where the afternoon sun helped keep the fire bricks warm and the fireplace efficient.'<sup>14</sup>

I read of another pioneer in this field in John Nicholson's book. John Flynn (Flynn of the Inland) masterminded the construction of a string of bush nursing hospitals in the outback - one at Alice Springs. 'The really interesting thing about this building was the ingenious way it was kept cool.'<sup>15</sup> They used wet sacks and a system of tunnels to ensure a continual movement of cool air through the building. 'This building also has a verandah all around it, shading the outside walls to stop them heating up in the sun.'<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps with the shadow of Global Warming and a looming energy crisis there will need to be a revolution in the development of sustainable housing. Perhaps in a future non-air-conditioned Australia, verandahs, along with other environmentally practical measures, will once more, in both city and country, be as Australian as kangaroos. Necessity may be the mother of their re-invention.

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1 'A Home among the Gum Trees. The story of Australian houses' by John Nicholson. P 27

2 Sydney Morning Herald 16/7/'08-'A four-seasons homestead'

3 Sydney Morning Herald 16/7/'08-'A four-seasons homestead'

4 Sydney Morning Herald 16/7/'08-'A four-seasons homestead'

5 'A Home among the Gum Trees' P.26

6 'A Home among the Gum Trees' P 27