



LIFE IN AUSTRALIA AFTER WORLD WAR II

RECONSTRUCTION

The period after World War II was one of **reconstruction** in Australia. Soldiers needed to be repatriated, found jobs, and sent on a path to rebuilding their lives after their experiences of war. Those who had changed their lives to contribute to the war effort in other ways, and families that had lost loved ones, also embarked on the journey towards their future happiness and success. Having endured two world wars and the Great Depression in the space of thirty years, Australia looked towards its leaders to point the way forward. Out of the policies of the Chifley Labor Government to 1949 and the Liberal governments under Menzies, Holt, Gorton and McMahon until 1972, an Australian 'way of life' would emerge with the belief that Australia was the **'lucky country'**.

Priorities for the Australian people leading into the 1950s, and the governments that led them, included:

- national security against perceived external threats and Australia's place in the Cold War (1945–91)
- economic growth and stability to provide employment and opportunities

- supporting and providing for population growth due to a baby boom and the arrival of migrants from across Europe through affordable housing and social services.

LIVING 'THE AUSTRALIAN DREAM'

A HOUSE IN THE SUBURBS

The key component to living **the Australian dream** in the 1950s was raising a family in your own home. To most Australians this meant a brick house on a quarter-acre suburban block. Many returning servicemen were keen to pursue this dream. Returned servicemen were offered cheap war-service home loans to help them begin their new lives and to kick-start the building industry, which had virtually stood still during the war. The *Commonwealth and State*

SOURCE 4.2.1 Metropolitan population growth, 1947–66. Figures from Commonwealth of Australia Year Books, Australian Bureau of Statistics

- Q**
- 1 Which capital city was most heavily affected by migrants from overseas?
 - 2 Explain how statistics such as these can be useful to historians studying housing in the 1950s.
 - 3 What are the limitations of using statistics in historical studies?

METROPOLITAN DIVISION	NATURAL INCREASE	NET MIGRATION OF AUSTRALIAN-BORN	NET MIGRATION OF OVERSEAS-BORN	TOTAL POPULATION INCREASE	TOTAL ANNUAL POPULATION INCREASE (%)
Numbers					
Sydney	378 784	266	463 413	842 463	—
Melbourne	365 649	1 438	522 111	889 198	—
Brisbane	132 672	87 720	108 820	320 212	—
Adelaide	104 372	52 579	203 887	360 868	—
Perth	103 910	37 455	114 488	255 853	—
Hobart	28 746	9 946	18 286	56 978	—
Percentage (%)					
Sydney	45.0	0.0	55.0	100.0	2.3
Melbourne	41.1	0.2	58.7	100.0	2.4
Brisbane	38.6	27.4	34.0	100.0	2.9
Adelaide	28.9	14.6	56.5	100.0	2.5
Perth	40.6	14.6	44.8	100.0	3.1
Hobart	50.4	17.5	32.1	100.0	1.3

Housing Agreement Act was passed in 1945 with the goal of ensuring the production of adequate housing. State governments set up Housing Commissions to support this on a local level. However, the rapid post-war population growth experienced with the arrival of nearly 200 000 migrants by 1950 and many more still to come, plus the emerging baby boom, meant that Australia faced a housing shortage.

The growing population was not the only cause of the housing shortage. Many migrants tended to settle in urban areas rather than in rural settlements as initially expected, creating a strain on city resources. The change of government in 1949 led to housing construction costs doubling within twelve months because of a removal of price controls on materials. To cope with the cost of building a traditional brick and timber home, cheaper and more functional designs were developed that required fewer resources or could be built using other materials and methods. These included brick veneer, fibrous cement and hardboard. Many people resorted to building their own homes by purchasing and piecing together prefabricated sections, or by following designs and step-by-step instructions published in magazines. Some people joined **cooperative organisations** where skills and resources were shared as homes were built collaboratively.

As the demand for land increased, new suburbs began to spread beyond the existing limits of capital cities in every state. Many suburbs had limited transport and infrastructure to cope with the thousands of people living there. This left many feeling isolated, particularly women and migrants.

In 1951, 44 per cent of the houses being built in Australia were constructed by owner-builders.

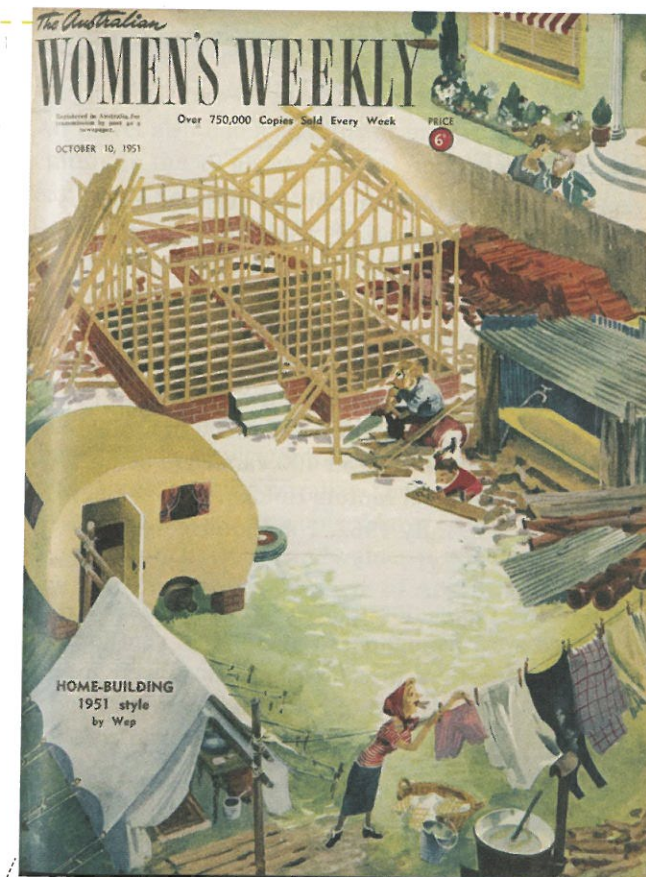
DID YOU KNOW?

HIGH-RISE HOUSING

High-rise housing, called 'flats', catered for people who did not want to leave the established suburbs or could not afford the cost of a self-contained house. However, many people with families still longed for life in the suburbs of backyard cricket, a few chickens, a vegetable patch, and sitting around the kitchen table for a Sunday roast. This image was reinforced in magazines, radio and television programs of the time (after 1956), leaving those struggling and who had to resort to living in the barracks and tents of World War II army camps feeling left out of the Australian dream.

CREATURE COMFORTS

The growing prosperity of Australia in the 1950s was not only evident in the housing boom and almost full employment. It was also apparent in the use of modern electrical appliances such as washing machines, refrigerators, toasters and ovens, vacuum cleaners, sewing machines and irons, pressure cookers and food processors



SOURCE 4.2.2 The William Edwin Pidgeon (known as Wep) cartoon 'Home-building 1951 style' was published on the cover of *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 10 October 1951. Held at the National Library of Australia

Q According to the cartoonist, what are some of the difficulties associated with building your own home?

in many households. Modern appliances and inventions were not restricted to indoors, with iconic items such as the Victa® lawn-mower and Hills® Hoist clothes line becoming features of most homes. The manufacture of these products had become more refined in the post-war period and they in turn became more affordable. For those short on funds, there was also the possibility of buying products on **hire purchase**, allowing people to pay off the cost of a product over time.

Modern kitchens were being made of more durable and easy-to-clean products such as laminated bench-tops and stainless steel sinks. In 1943, only 2 per cent of households surveyed in inner-city Melbourne had a hot-water service. By the early 1960s, this had changed with most urban homes utilising hot water on tap and new bathrooms were being built with separate shower recesses.

The local corner store was being replaced by large supermarkets offering a broader variety of foods that could now be stored more efficiently in the home. Modern conveniences led to improved hygiene and health, changed eating habits, and generally made life easier. Families, and in particular women, had much more time for leisure activities. Not only had the look of Australian homes changed, but a key aspect of the Australian way of life included the expectation of having more time for fun.