

Centenary flashback: housing designs over the years: part one

During the past 100 years, housing designs have grown to reflect society's changing needs and advances in the building industry. Today *Snapshots* takes a look back at housing trends adopted by the Department over the years.

In 1912, when the Department was first established, the majority of Western Australian houses were built from timber or brick. The reliance on these materials in the late 1800s and early 1900s led to frequent material shortages and increasing costs.



A brick house being constructed by the Workers' Homes Board, 1913

Anxious to relieve its reliance on timber and brick, the Department contacted U.S. inventor, Thomas Edison in 1913 to enquire about his concrete-mould house invention.

Unfortunately the design was found to be a 'handyman's nightmare' and was never adopted by the Workers' Homes Board – sending them back to the drawing board in the hunt for alternative building materials.



Thomas Edison beside a model of his failed concrete-mould house

During the 1920s and 1930s, a low-cost timber 'Type 7' cottage was designed by the Board to accommodate people living in settlers housing, country areas and many McNess Housing Trust homes.



Type 7 settlers cottage, 1920s. Photo courtesy of State Library Western Australia 001512D

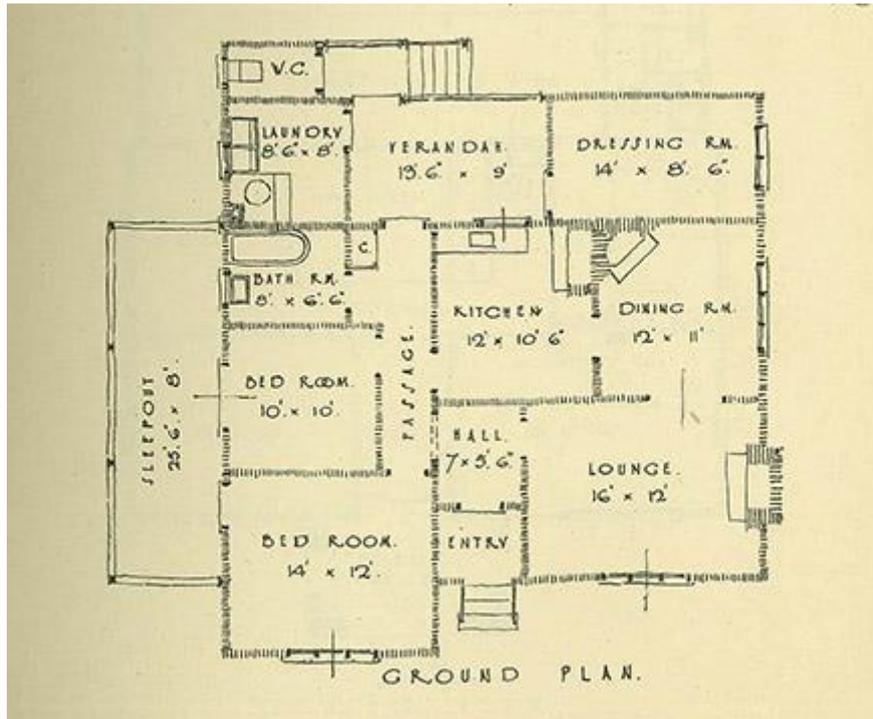
As the end of World War II grew close, a report written by the Ministry of Post-war Reconstruction in 1943, provided advice to the Department on how to best move forward after the war effort.

“It was agreed that the smallest single-unit dwelling to be erected in a government housing programme should be sufficient to accommodate four persons,” the report said.

“For larger families, we consider that greater flexibility is provided by maintaining a three bedroom dwelling as a maximum and providing sleep-outs where additional accommodation is required.

“No two persons of the opposite sex eight years of age and over, not husband and wife, could occupy the same room. The age for sex separation of children, which is less than common over-seas practice, has been determined after consultation with various medial and health authorities.”

The report also revealed ‘the basic wage-earner should not be required to pay more than one sixth of his income for rental, nor more than one fifth for home purchase.’



A floor plan of a Workers' Homes Board house with two bedrooms and a sleep-out to accommodate additional family members

Despite the recommendation for housing to accommodate a minimum of four people, post-war housing shortages meant housing needed to be built, and quickly.

The Department's solution to the shortage was to begin building expansible homes, which were more affordable and took less time to build.

"An expansible home is a dwelling that can be expanded in later years to suit the needs of a growing family," reported the West Australian in 1949.



The first expansible home built by the State Housing Commission in South Perth. The basic unit of the expansible home is a bedroom, a large living room which also services for a time for the preparation of meals, a bathroom, a laundry and other necessary conveniences

In 1949 the first prefabricated home was also built in Western Australia in response to the increasing demand for 'less expensive dwellings'.

“Much attention has been given recently to the provision of pre-cut and part-prefabricated timber framed dwellings suitable for both metropolitan and country requirements,” reported the West Australian in 1949.



The first prefabricated home built in Western Australia. Situated in Welshpool, the house had a timber frame and asbestos outside

To be continued...