ABORIGINAL HOUSING IN AUSTRALIA
An Architect's View

Bal Saini
Emeritus Professor of Architecture
University of Queensland

Until recently architects, along with the rest of the Australian community, have paid little attention to the plight and problems of the aboriginies.1 This is understandable when it is realised that most architects are normally preoccupied with the task of designing and constructing individual structures, with the preparation of working drawings and details of houses, flats and offices in the main centres of population, and the idea of tackling broader problems of environmental and social planning has rarely appealed to them. In the 'outback', away from the town centres where most of the aborigines and part-aborigines live, the scope for such an approach to building is limited.

In its present form the architectural profession does not seem to be fully aware of the potential and the extent to which its members can contribute towards the problems which are social and economic rather than purely technical. Yet the challenge is there; challenge to build a better life and to create, with sympathy and understanding, an environment in which this depressed group of people can grow up as proud citizens with a sense of belonging and responsibility that goes with it. In this article it is not proposed to supply answers to all the complex problems, but its chief purpose is to highlight factors and discuss the background in which policies and programmes of economic and social welfare operate, programmes which directly or indirectly affect the provision of such matters as Aboriginal health, education, housing and other services.

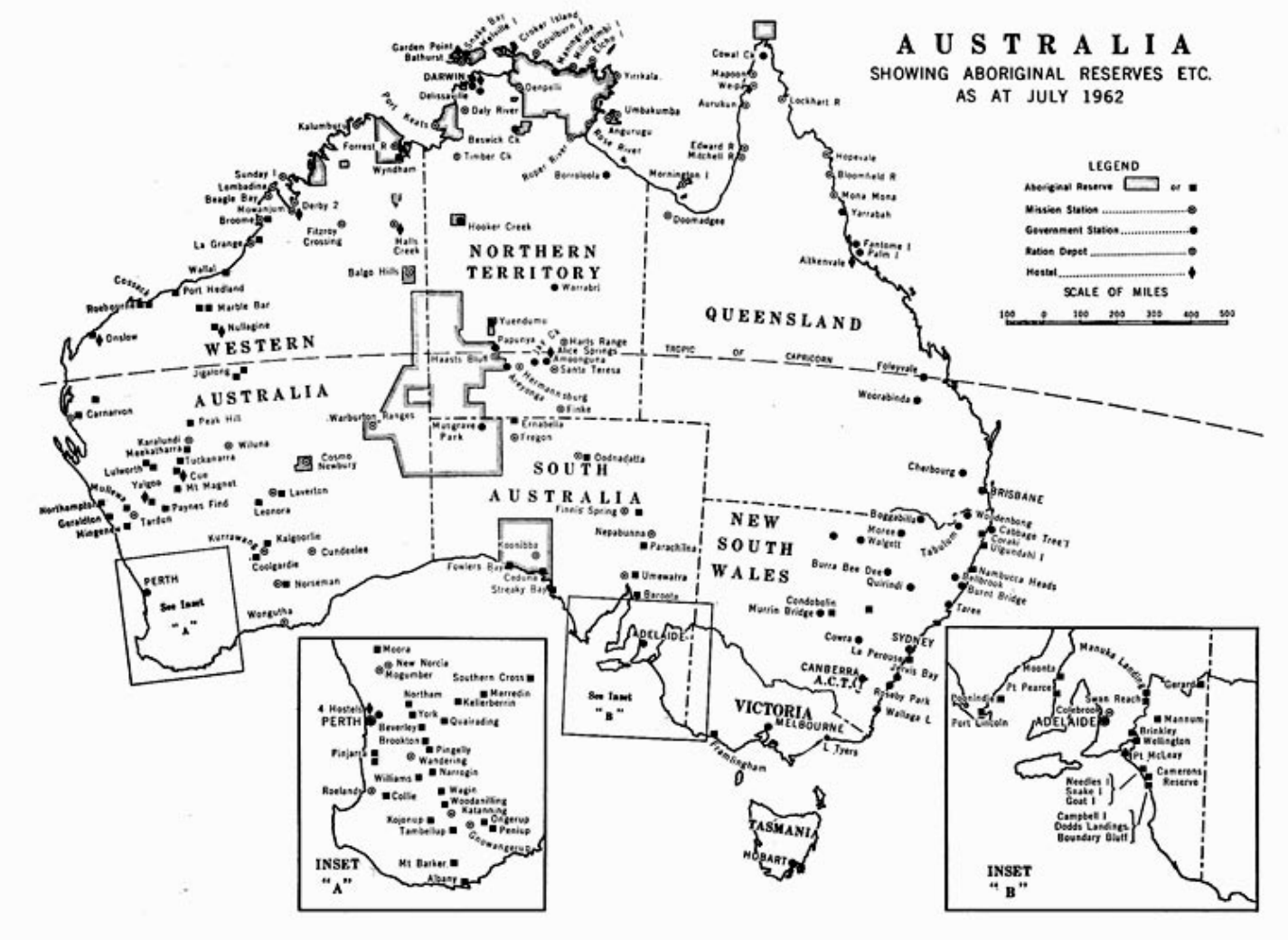
Aborigines comprise between one and two per cent of the total Australian population. Of the estimated figure of just under 130,000, approximately one-third are full-blood aborigines, the majority of whom live in the Northern Territory, Queensland and Western Australia. In the Northern Territory alone there are 20,159 aborigines who, together with 4,500 part-aborigines, constitute about 36 per cent of the total population of the area.2 Recent studies indicate that their numbers are ‘increasing at an unprecedented rate’.3

Population Distribution

Although there seem to be considerable deficiencies in census figures as a record of absolute numbers of aborigines in Aus-

give a fairly reliable indication of the distribution pattern. According to Long, taking all the mainland states, (including the Northern Territory) together 'just over nine per cent of the aboriginal population lived in the State capitals, where over 56 per cent of the total Australian population lived in 1961'. Just over 23 per cent of the aborigines lived in all urban areas (towns over 1,000 people), compared with 82 per cent of Australians generally.4 In the Northern Territory at present over 80 per cent of the Europeans live in the only urban centres of Darwin, Alice Springs, Tennant Creek, Katherine and Batchelor, whereas 88 to 92 per cent of the full-blood aboriginal population lives away from the towns in what can be termed "remote rural".

Population Distribution



Following the pattern indicated by the above figures, it would be safe to way that an overwhelming number of these people are primarily rural in character. If we assume that the aborigines and part-aborigines who live in urban areas are partially or fully assimilated into the European communities, a view which may be debatable, then it would be logical to conclude that the vast majority of these people who live in rural areas are not assimilated at present.

The number of aborigines, who could be classified as truly nomadic, is very small, probably no more than 400 to 500. Most of them roam about in the central desert west and southwest of Alice Springs. The majority, and this include those in remote areas along the northern coast and the central arid lands, live in reserves, missions and settlements. Quite a few go on from there to work on pastoral properties and developmental enterprises of the region, while others come to live on the fringes of the big population centres. The latter, most of whom camp near railway sidings, roads and along the riverbeds, continue to seek acceptance and life within the wider Australian community, but very few seem to be able to achieve it. Separated by a generation or two from a fully tribal life they drift between the two cultures and belong to neither. In Australia, the bulk of the present aboriginal and part-aboriginal population falls into this group.

The problem of building for the aborigines is closely related to the programmes of economic and social welfare. These programmes, which have assumed different forms in differ-

ent States of the Commonwealth, have been generated by the official policy of assimilation. Apart from potitical rights, employment opportunities and wages, this policy has been largely responsible for bringing about the present forms of native administration, systems of settlements, missions, health, education and vocational training programmes.

The policy, which was first enunciated in 1951, aims at promoting and directing social change in such a manner that, while retaining connections with, and pride in their ancestry, the aborigines are expected to become 'indistinguishable in habits and customs from European'. On the face of it, this seems to be an admirable approach; but it has met with considerable opposition and criticism, not only from the aborigines themselves, but also from a number of Europeans who are vitally interested in the welfare and future of these people. Generally, though progress has been made in some sectors, the policy seems to have failed to achieve its original aims laid down in 1951. The admission of this failure was evident in the amended version of this policy, which was adopted in July 1965, by the Native Welfare Conference held in Adelaide.

Government Policies

The precise meaning of assimilation was spelt out most clearly at the Conference of Commonwealth and State Ministers concerned with Aboriginal welfare in Canberra in 1961 and later in Darwin in 1964.5

The policy of assimilation means that all aborigines and part-aborigines will attain the same manner of living as other Australians and live as members of a single Australian community enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs, hopes and loyalties as other Australians.

To the many critics of this policy, assimilation implies racial superiority on the part of the white man, largely because it assumes that people of two different cultures cannot live amicably together unless one is to be absorbed by the other. The critics maintain that the aim of the policy of assimilation is to make aborigines as a race disappear completely. They will become white in everything except perhaps the colour of their skin.Docker writes:6

Aborigines are a very proud people and they are not convinced that the Australian way of life is necessarily superior to theirs. Like most human beings they are naturally hoping to be accepted and approved, but as equal and mature people in their own right, not as imitation Europeans. It will be difficult to obtain their co-operation unless Australians are prepared to accept them as they are, respect their culture and not force drastic changes on them.

Obviously, no one can deny that the Australian aborigines must change in many ways, culturally, socially and economically, in order to survive in today's world but it is essential that this change is brought about in such a way that it imposes minimum strain on the people. According to Daryll Forde:7

There are definite limits to the rate of cultural change. Operating at a higher level of technical equipment and political organistion the more powerful alien cultures are bound to overwhelm and somewhat destroy the comparatively weaker cultures. Beyond a certain point the pressure of alien culture results in the internal collapse of the native life without assimilation of the new. Unfortunately such pressures are rarely exercised by a single organised and self-conscious body but are rather the results of conflicting forces within the western world itself – governments, traders, planters, colonists and missionaries – such a plan is very difficult to achieve and the dangers are too often unseen until too late.

Perhaps this is the reason behind the extreme apathy of most aborigines in the face of policies and schemes ostensibly designed for their benefit.

Owing to continuous pressures, mostly from aboriginal advancement groups, a considerable body of opinion has lately been built up in favour of the concept of integration. Integration recognises the fact that aborigines, urban or tribal, are largely a product of heritage in which kinship obligation, values, amusements, religious ideas, and so on, are distinctly from the traditions of white Australians. It recognises the need to retain these aspects of their heritage, which are indispensable to their emotional security. In practice, such an approach will not force the aborigines to 'scatter' into the greater community where they may, or may not, establish themselves as independent, self-respecting citizens, but it will allow them to maintain some sort of 'transitional separation', a situation which may allow them to adjust towards the wider Australian community at a pace set by themselves. It would mean the

aborigines might form their own communities, develop their own forms of self-government, and be given their own land and generally shape their own immediate environment. To back their arguments, the integrationists point out how other countries such as America and New Zealand, in dealing with their minority tribal groups, have all but given up assimilation in favour of integration.8 They point out the fact that it was as early as 1934 when the U.S. Government formally abandoned the kind of assimilation programme launched by the Australian Government in 1951.

They also point to India whose Prime Minister, the late Pundit Nehru, when faced with the problem of dealing with the country's 25 million tribespeople, spelt out the basic approach of his government to the planning and administration in the following terms.9

I am alarmed when I see how anxious people are to shape others to their own image or likeness, and to impose on them their particular way of living. I am not at all sure which is the better way of living, the tribal or our own. In some respects I am quite certain theirs is better. Therefore, it is grossly presumptuous on our part to approach them with an air of superiority. There is no point in trying to make of them a second rate copy of ourselves.

In 1965, partly as a result of continuous criticism and partly due to the fact that the policy, after having been in operation for well over a decade, failed to achieve the objective for which is was set out, was reconsidered by the Native Welfare Conference.

Indian woman from Adivasi tribe.

The statement was slightly, but significantly, amended to read:10

The policy of assimilation seeks that all persons of aboriginal descent will choose to attain a similar manner and standard of living to that of other Australians and live as members of a single Australian community.

This altered version, when read against the earlier statement, indicated the significant changes: '*are expected eventually to attain*' has been replaced by '*will choose to attain*'; the words '*same manner*' by '*similar manner*'; while phrases such as '*they should observe the same customs'* and 'be influenced by the same beliefs' have been omitted altogether. The statement indicated a definite change in the official attitude, but whether it would bring about a similar change in the administrative practice remains to be seen. Perhaps, what is even more important is the need for a change in the attitude of the ordinary white Australians.

That such a change may already be taking place is indicated by the results of the Referendum on May 27, 1967, when 89.34 per cent of the Australian electorate voted in favour of constitutional changes which to some degree make aborigines a federal responsibility. Such changes could well mean 'greater flow of funds for welfare programmes as well as more enlightened and progressive measures on a national scale; measures which may end discrimination as said to be practiced by the state'.11 In its essence the problem is likely to continue as a

matter of adjustment between two sets of people; a matter which cannot be settled by government legislation.

If logically applied, the amended policy could enable the aborigines and part-aborigines to develop and be accepted as a permanent distinct minority within the Australian community; a minority not dissimilar to that already formed by people of Greek or Chinese origin. To be successful, it would need to provide aborigines with adequate social and economic opportunities, and at the same time persuade them to make the most of the opportunities, which already exist in the country.

Lately, there has been a considerable development of mineral resources, as well as pastoral and agricultural ventures in what is known as Tropical Australia. It is a region, which, according to some authorities, has definite potentialities and could well experience substantial growth in the near future. Some of this activity is located in the aboriginal reserves such as Port Keats and Arnheim Land, but the local people are seldom offered work, which could raise their standard of living beyond that, provided by menial and labouring tasks. This is so despite the face that as workers, aborigines possess some advantages over the Europeans. The most important being the fact that for most aborigines, Tropical Australia is their permanent home. In contrast, the Europeans, with the possible exception of a few in Northern Queensland, regard the more temperate areas of the continent's southern fringe as their real home.

Further, the aborigines physically adapt themselves to the stresses and strains imposed upon them by the harsh climate of the Australian tropics.

The degree of adaptability is difficult to assess, but is would seem that adaptability tends to decrease with the increasing contact with European society. According to Macfarlane, the factors which give the aborigine an advantage over the European include 'his capacity to drink and retain large quantities of water, his low blood pressure and his ability to conserve salt in his body'.12 Macfarlane maintains, however, that there is no clear evidence that the aborigine has a racially different physiology from that of the European. Probably all the differences that have been observed arise from the exposure of children to the foodstuffs, pattern of life, and seasonal temperature changes of the desert throughout their lives. The adjustments that take place are those, which any human being could make under these circumstances.

The physical advantages, which most aborigines possess, are hardly sufficient to compensate for the lack of education and training necessary for skilled well-paid employment. Until recently, 9,000 to 12,000 aborigines have been employed in pastoral enterprises. This is due to the fact that stock work has always depended upon the availability of cheap aboriginal labour; labour which, in fact, has specific skills such as tracking, mustering, drafting and branding. The extent to which the pastoral industry can absorb additional aboriginal labour is likely to be limited in the coming years.

The mining enterprises in Tropical Australia are also not in a position to absorb much of the aboriginal population directly. Being a capital intensive industry mining tends to incur extraordinarily high costs. These make it necessary to maximise on equipment and minimise on labour content. As a result, the tendency seems to be to emphasise skilled work and reduce the unskilled work to absolute minimum. This puts a limit on the number of aborigines the industry can absorb, unless, of course, a concerted programme of training is launched in order to prepare these people for the more exacting tasks involved in such operations.

At present, with the exception of Broken Hill at Groote Eylandt and to a lesser extent Comalco at Weipa, most of the mining enterprises have shown little inclination to encourage the employment of aborigines. At Weipa, apart from those engaged in construction work, a few have been given semi-skilled positions, jobs which require no sudden application of initiative. According to Tonkin, these include 'fork lift drivers in the masonry block plant, concrete mixer operators and drivers of small vehicles engaged in routine duties in low density traffic areas'.13 The record of aboriginal employment at Groote Eylandt manganese project is even better where, commencing with a single full-time employee in July of 1963, the employment of local aborigines has increased to 43 out of a total work force of 163 in May, 1966. According to McKenzie, these men are employed in positions such as 'plant-operators on bulldozers, front-end loaders and five-ton cranes, drivers

of five-ton motor trucks, mechanical trades assistants, messhands and general labourers'. Besides, in contrast to Weipa, aborigines at Groote Eylandt have been given full equality in every respect including wages, accommodation, messing, education and recreation. The transition from a virtual tribal system to an industrial society has been remarkably swift. The reason for this, according to McKenzie, lay in the 'provision of equal opportunities and ready acceptance by the Europeans'.14

There is certainly some scope for employment in the auxiliary services such as baking, hygiene services, painting and maintenance.

With industrial expansion there should be opportunities in the existing and new urban centres, where a chronic shortage of housing is notable. Efforts to meet this shortage could result in new jobs – semi-skilled and others – in building and construction industries, as well as transport, storage and communications. According to Hennessy "these two groups of industries (already) employ about 25 per cent of the non-aboriginal labour force and (they) could be expected to undergo further expansion in the next decade, providing jobs for aborigines with basic training for employment as truck drivers, bricklayers, carpenters and labourers'.15

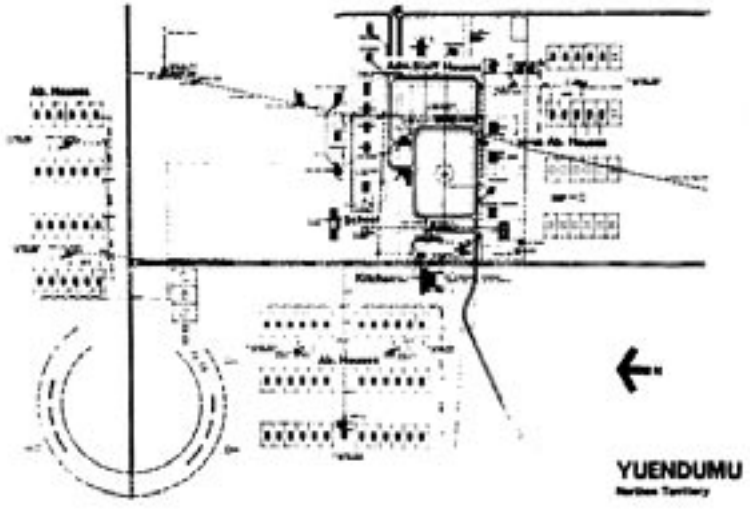
Apart from providing work opportunities, mining and other new developmental projects offer excellent prospects of a sound economic base for settlements and mission popula-

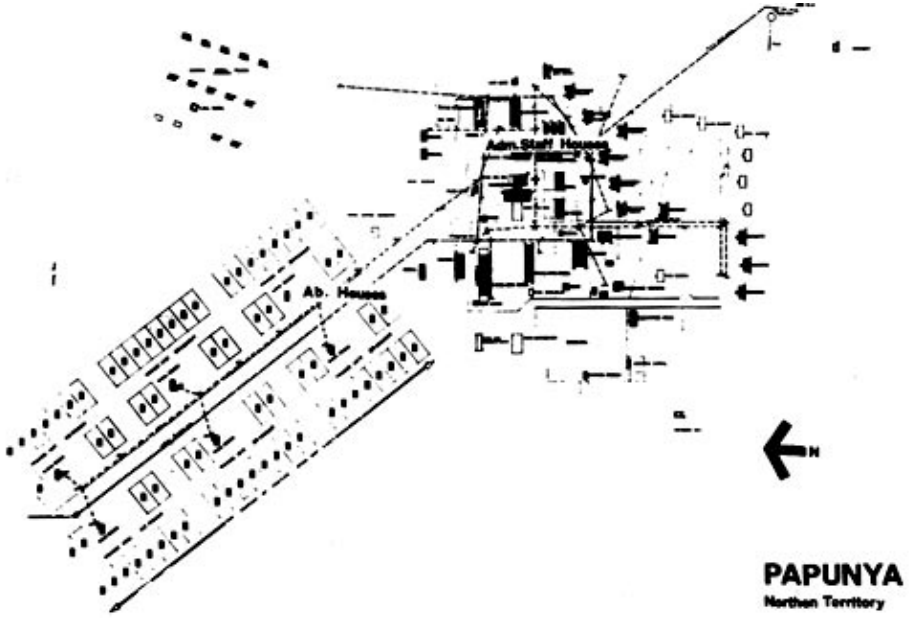
tions in these areas. There may also be possibilities for the long-term development of some of the aboriginal settlements on an individual profit-making or co-operative basis, carrying on such activities as sawmilling, dairying, egg production, pig raising, fishing and other small scale industries.

A few settlements have already made a beginning in this direction. Oenpelli mission has stock work and its own abattoirs; Elcho Island has horticulture, fishing and timer milling. But the majority, in spite of the active training, educational and economic programmes which started in earnest in 1954, tend to be merely transitory camps and seem to offer little more than a place where free rations of food and clothing are distributed. With the exception of Elcho Island, economic potential of all other government settlements and Christian missions has not yet been exploited. Most require substantial subsidies to operate.

If the ultimate aim is to make the aborigines independent, responsible and self-reliant, then the settlements and missions can help to achieve these aims in two ways. First they can act as training centres and, secondly, they can provide a wealth base, which could comprise a number of production enterprises, such as handicrafts, farming and fishing, depending upon the local potential in each case. Training and education could help the aborigines to acquire skills, which may be valuable in finding and holding jobs outside the settlements. It could also introduce these people to the money economy and to contractual relationships. Physical planning and building

Above: Aerial view of Yuendumu government native settlement in the Northern Territory.
Left: Bathust Island Mission,Northern Territory





Above left: Sawmill at Snake Bay government settlement, Melville Island.
Above: Aborigines putting a roof on a building at Delissavile,Northen Territory

design can play a positive role by guiding local development and ensuring ultimate integration of the settlements with the plans for regional development. The way in which such a contribution can be made was recently outlined in a submission to the Planning and Action Committee on the Lake Tyers Settlement in South-eastern Victoria.16

Failure to take such measures is unlikely to either stop or arrest the development of the Australian Tropics but the existence of such large aboriginal population within the region does pose a challenge to all who are engaged in the exploitation of the resources there. Under pressure from enlightened opinion within Australia and overseas, the governments, the welfare agencies and particular firms involved in the developmental enterprises will, sooner or later, have to ensure that 'in the wake of changes there, the aborigines must not only share in some part of the benefits which may accrue but also minimise the hardships they might suffer in the course of such developments.17

Housing for Aborigines

Aboriginal housing tends to receive far more attention than it warrants. The reason for this probably lies in the attitude of observers who themselves come from more economically developed societies where housing is regarded as an obvious manifestation of people's standards of living and material prosperity. The same yardstick, when applied to aboriginal housing, tends to ignore the possibility that the attitude of the

aborigines towards housing may be fundamentally different from the rest of the Australian community.
The problems of aboriginal housing are complex. Although, total aboriginal numbers are small, the range of tribal groups and sub-groups is extensive.

Most of the small minority of 5500 or so truly nomadic aborigines live in the Central Desert region where they manage to survive in the open, night and day, without clothes, houses, beds, tables and the other trappings of modern civilisation. They move on from one camping site to another in search of better hunting and water. They dislike settled ways.

Generally these nomads prefer to sleep under the sky using a curved windbreak made of brush about two feet high. Rows of shallow sleeping places are then hollowed out in the desert soil, each sufficient to fit a body. These beds are about three feet apart and between each a small fire is lit for comfort and sometimes to keep evil spirits away.

Aborigines and part-aborigines who camp near railway sidings, along the banks of the rivers and on the outskirts of towns and settlements are perhaps the worst housed. Many live in temporary shelters known as wurlies, humpies, or gunyahs. In its most primitive from a wurley is built by fixing two large forked sticks into the ground so as to make a doorway. Then a few more sticks are placed in a semicircle behind them and bent over to meet in the centre towards the doorway. Branches are laid over this framework and the whole shelter

Above: A spinifex wurley
Below: Sleep behind a windbreak *(reproduced by permission of Oxford University Press sketches by Alison Forbes)*

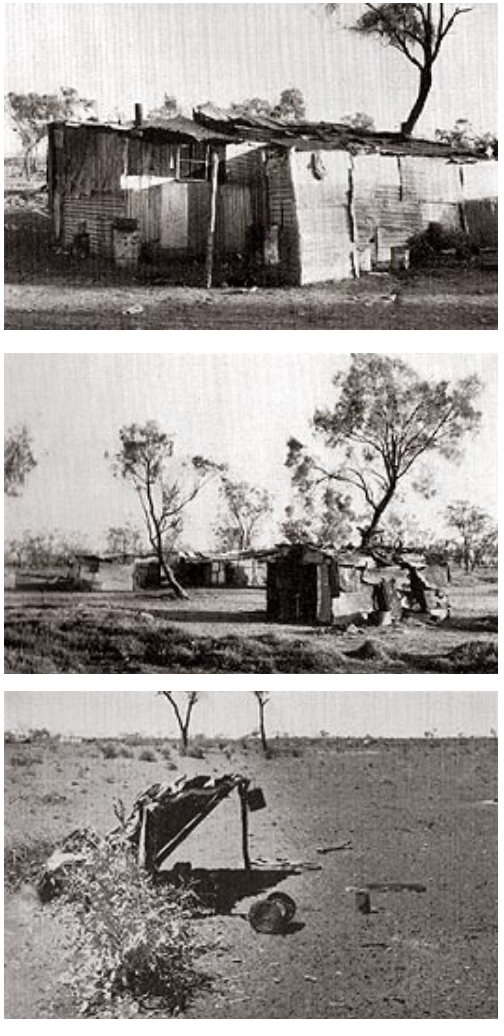
is thatched with spinifex, a very stiff, spiny, desert grass. On a cold night a small fire is lit in the doorway for warmth and cooking.

Now a days this form of construction is an exception rather than the rule. A vast majority of temporary shelters are built from scraps of iron and timber. Though slightly more durable than the spinifex wurlies, they are less comfortable in hot weather. Due to the absence of basic services, all such temporary shelters soon become unhygienic and convey a picture of abject poverty and degradation.

The writer's own observations were confirmed by many others including reporter Graham Williams who, after a survey of seven country towns in the semi-arid region of Western New South Wales stated:18

The shanty towns everywhere are deplorable. Most of these crude tin huts house families of eight and ten who sleep two and three in a single bed. The huts have no water, no refrigeration, no stoves or baths. Many would scarcely serve as small backyard fowl-shed . . . the government reserves and stations are little better. Situated well out of town, many like the Wilcannia reserve, are ghettos. Many have water only to the backyard tap; most have no sinks or stoves. Many have no electricity . . . - 'It's hell trying to live in our dump'. Mr. Stan Cooper of Roseby Park Station, Nowra, told me 'you can't bring up kids decently when there's seven of you sleeping in two rooms and nowhere to bath.

With the exception of a few stations where considerable sums of money have recently been spent in an effort to bring accommodation up to the standards laid down in the 1953 Wel-



Temporary Aboriginal settlements near town centres

fare Ordinance and the Wards' Employment Ordinance, the housing conditions of aborigines on cattle stations are very poor. Many station owners have shown a lack of concern for the welfare of the aborigines. After a visit to their quarters in Wave Hill Cattle Station in the Northern Territory, Christopher Forsyth had this to say:19

The homes were rusted iron shells, four walls leaning in towards each other, pieces of hessian covering up the worst holes. There were about 25 of them . . . None was higher than 4ft with an opening of about 3ft 6in. They were about 5ft wide and 8ft long. There appeared to be no water and certainly no sanitation. I have never seen a more desolate place, nor such a disgusting sight in a country which prides itself in giving people a fair go.

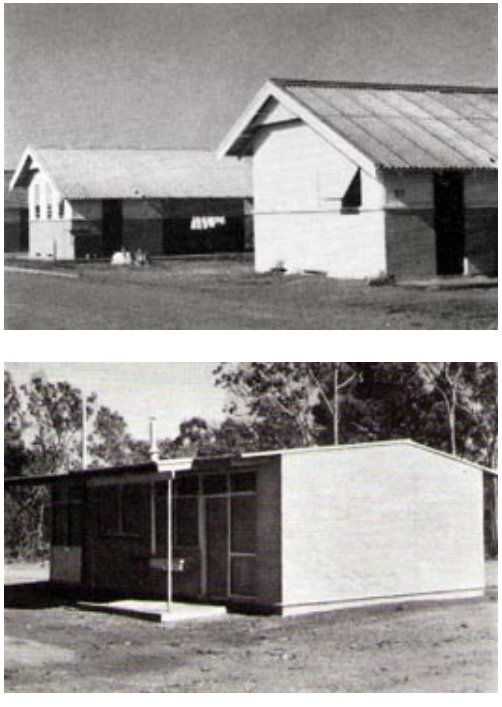
Housing of the aborigines on the mission stations and the government settlements is an improvement on this, but have standards, which are far below the minimum regarded as suitable for Europeans. As a result they are the target of continuous criticism. With the exception of newly built houses in Santa Teresa and Yuendumu settlements in the Alice Springs district, most lack not only sufficient accommodation, but also rudimentary services such as electric supply, water reticulation, kitchen and waste disposal. In all the settlements visited by the writer, communal kitchens do feeding, and water is available only from creeks, or from a centrally located tap supply. Communal latrines are provided and the houses themselves suffer from over-crowding, lack of ventilation, insulation and light.

Aluminium shelters at Amoonguna near Alice Springs

Present housing on various government settlements reflects the failure of welfare agencies and departments, who owing to lack of funds, confusion over priorities and targets, and ignorance of need and methods to meet them, have been largely unable to provide better accommodation. The standards vary from State to State and range from typical Australian suburban villas in part of Queensland to the so-called "Kingstrand" aluminum shelters devoid of even rudimentary services, in the Northern Territory. The latter, which largely consist of single-roomed aluminum huts, offer little comfort from the blazing sun and are therefore rarely used by the aborigines except during the night when too many pack into each unit in order to shield themselves from the cold desert winds. The actual degree to which these aluminum structures provide shelter to those who occupy them is difficult to assess. The only reliable observation comes from Tatz, who, having lived in one of these houses over a number of days, recorded the conditions in the following terms:20

Kingstrand aluminum (house) is meant to reflect heat. While the writer's experiments are not put forward as scientific evidence, his conclusions, on attempting to live in an unceilinged, uninsulated Kingstrand in Central Australia, is that they are uninhabitable. The concrete floor was hot at 11 pm; the measured temperature was 18 F higher than the outside temperature and 23 F higher than the interior of a spinifex-grass humpy at the same hour. 'Bloody fire box' was one of the printable verdicts of aborigines who discussed the question.

The reason why the Administration continues to build such temporary huts probably stems from its policy approach to



Above: House types at Bagot Darwin

the aboriginal settlements. These are considered as temporary institutions. They are centres, which have been primarily established to help prepare the aborigines in their 'transitional stage between primitive nomadism and western urbanism'. The aluminum huts have presumably been selected because they can be built rapidly and easily. Their components can be dismantled and transported quickly over long distances and then reassembled again for further use. In spite of their transitional qualities, 'Kingstrands' do look somewhat like a 'house' in contrast to wurlies and humpies, which abound in the area. If the ultimate objective, however, is to train the aborigines to facilitate their absorption within the wider Australian community then it is difficult to see how these single-roomed shelters can help to achieve it. Apart from lack of comfort, the absence of even the elementary services normal to an average Australian house, could hardly be considered as providing the best opportunities for the aborigines to learn to use them.

Above: Homefraft training centre at Bagot Darwin
Below: Staff house at Warrabri settlement, Northern Territory

In the past the Welfare Branch of the Northern Territory Administration has considered other types of housing. The so-called 'native cement houses' appear to be more comfortable and are known to be cheaper. Attempts have also been made at Warrabri and other settlements to build houses from stabilised soil blocks and bricks using soil from ant-beds. These have been manufactured locally under self-help-cum-training programmes. Unfortunately, most of these projects have either been abandoned or the progress has been so slow that they were hardly adequate to meet the urgent needs of the

community. Apart from the absence of a co-ordinated training programme, the chief reason seems to lie in the frequent turnover of the Welfare staff who are unable to provide systematic supervision necessary for the successful continuity of building operations.

It seems that there are only two possible answers to this complex problem; either to build houses which embody the same needs, character, feeling and atmosphere as those occupied by Australians whose standards the aborigines are expected to achieve as well as aspire to; or to provide basic accommodation specially designed to meet the continually changing needs of these people in transition. The present housing fails to achieve either of these objectives.

Handoperated brick making machines

The first approach if logically pursued would mean subsidisation of a housing programme with standards much higher than those used at present. Considering the sheer size of the problem it could well be a costly venture. Assuming a sudden change of heart, not only amongst the Australian people, but also in the attitude of the governments, Federal and State, and further assuming that substantial funds are forthcoming for this type of housing, then, as a logical consequence of the policy of assimilation, the ultimate answer would be to provide aboriginal families with housing which is, at present, considered suitable for Europeans.

This step, by itself, is unlikely to solve the whole problem, since the aborigines could well be selective about what they

want and may offer resistance to such a specific form of change imposed upon them. A typical European house of 12 to 14 squares, with two or three bedrooms, would be inadequate to satisfy most of the accommodation requirements of an aboriginal family, who are quite likely to be frequently confronted with the sudden arrival of relatives and others to whom, because of tribal associations and strong family obligations, they would be obliged to offer all the hospitality due to visiting guests. The evidence of this is available at the Lake Tyers and other aboriginal settlements in Victoria where the standard Housing Commission and Aboriginal Welfare Board homes built for the aborigines have been found inadequate to meet the accommodation needs of an average family size of which could well fluctuate from 4 or 5 to as many as 20.

This problem is very similar to that which exists in most tribal and other societies where community structures do not exist on the basis of a single family unit. Such communities have generally managed to solve the problem of accommodation by building extensive deep verandahs and courtyards; spaces which provide additional though, partial shelter, privacy and room for storage. This space could only be provided either by allocating larger sums per unit than those made to house a typical Australian town family, or by cutting down on the standards of finishes and by using cheaper and therefore possibly less durable building
materials.

The second approach is more suitable for Central Australia's nomadic and semi-nomadic section of the aboriginal community, as it offers adaptability instead of cut-and-dried precise solutions. Anthropologists and sociologists who are familiar with the complexities of tribal institutions can assist in determining functional requirements at certain well-defined stages, but this could be a slow process, which may still offer limitations to freedom in design and quick execution of the housing programms.

A possible solution to this problem could well lie in a modest approach to environmental design which merely concentrates on supplying essential needs, by means of assembly of basic structural components and roof systems. Such an approach could be of considerable value in the organisation and unification of the local environment. It leaves sufficient freedom for the people themselves to construct their own immediate requirements and surroundings. Using their own initiative once again, the aborigines could by this approach, regain some of their self-pride and qualities of resourcefulness which were so characteristic of their earlier nomadic existence.

The problem of housing the nomads is not unique to Australia. Governments in several parts of the world have tackled it. The Soviet Union has created a network of schools, hospitals and collective farms for its nomadic people from the extreme north, who lived chiefly by hunting and reindeer breeding. How successful this large-scale collective and industrial approach turned out is not known, but similar programmes in

Iran were not very promising. In the first year, 'instead of benefiting from the chimneys and ovens installed in the houses, the nomads preferred to light their fires on the floor of the houses, and in order to evacuate the smoke, they merely cut holes in the ceilings. When the rains came through the holes they solved the problem by simply leaving their houses and setting up tents in the grounds and living there with their cattle and livestock around them'.21

There is little doubt that the process of nomadic and semi-nomadic settlement requires tremendous patience and forbearance. It is indeed difficult to suggest a single and quick solution to the problem which is also able to satisfy all the delicate side issues at the same time, but a realistic approach could well lie in an attitude which considers housing not an end in itself but regards it as a part and parcel of the wider changes with which aborigines are involved – changes which incorporate social, cultural as well as economic factors.

Originally published:

'Aboriginal Problem - An Architect's View' Architecture in Australia. RAIA Jl. Oct. 1967. pp.782-799. & 'Housing for Aborigines in Australia'. Overseas Building Notes. No. 120. Sept. Building research Station, Garston .UK. and Interbuild, Feb.1966. Vol. 13, No.2. pp. 32-33.

References

1. The terms 'aborigine(s)' as a noun and 'aboriginal' as an adjective are popularly used in Australia. The actual definition of an aborigine varies according to legislation in force in each State. Generally, 'aborigine' means persons of full blood and 'part-aborigine' means persons of mixed aboriginal descent.

2. The figures below show the estimated total aboriginal population in Australia.

State	Aborigines	Part-Aborigines	Total
NSW (and the ACT)	300	23,000	23,300
Victoria	—	3,700	3,700
Queensland	15,000	35,000	50,000
S. Australia	2,500	4,500	7,000
W. Australia	9,739	11,490	21,229
Nthn. Territory	20,159	4,500	24,659
	47,698	82,190	129,888

From the information supplied by the Centre for Research into Aboriginal Affairs, Monash University, Personal Communication, April 1967.

3. Jones, F.L.; A Demographic Survey of the Aboriginal Population of the Northern Territory with Special Reference to Bathurst Island Mission. Occasional Papers in Aboriginal Studies, No. 1, A.I.A.S. Canberra, 1963, pp. 120. Although 1966 census figures for Aborigines have not been published there is strong evidence to suggest that the total Aboriginal population is in the region of 250,000, or 2.1 per cent of Australia's total. This is nearly twice the figure estimated in 1964. See Tatz, C.M. 'Australia's Aboriginal Problem', The Round Table, the Commonwealth Quarterly, No. 228, Oct. 1967, and Perkins, C. "General Discussion' at the Seminar "The Problems of Aboriginal Em-

ployment, Wages and Training", the papers and proceedings of which have been published as Aborigines in the Economy, ed. by Sharp, I.G., and Tatz, C.M., Jacaranda Press, 1966, p. 364.

4. Long, J.P.M., "The Numbers and Distribution of the Aboriginal in Australia", Aborigines in the Economy pp. 4-6.

5. The Policy of Assimilation – decisions of Commonwealth and State Ministers at the Native Welfare Conference, Canberra, 26-27 January 1961, issued by the Department of Territories, Canberra.

6. Docker, E.G., Simply Human Beings, The Jacaranda Press, Brisbane, 1961, p. 23.

7. Forde, Daryll C., Habitat, Economy and Society: A Geographical Introduction to Ethnology, Methuen, Lond. 1934. (P.B. 1963).

8. For views of the US and New Zealand Governments, refer to; Answers to Your Questions on American Indians, US Dept. of the Interior Bureau of Indian Affairs, 1962, p. 45, and Geddes, W.R. "Maori and the Aborigines: A Comparison of Attitudes and Policies" – Presidential address delivered to Section F. ANZAAS Conference, Brisbane, 1961, The Australian Journal of Science, Vol. 24, No. 5, Nov. 1961, pp. 217-225.

9. Nehru, Jawahar Lal, Forward to a Philosophy for NEFA, ed. by V.A. Elwin, 2nd Ed.

10. July 1965, Native Welfare Conference, Adelaide.

11. Tatz, C.M., 'Australia's Aboriginal Problem',
The Round Table.

12. Macfarlane, W.V., 'Life in the Dry Two-thirds of Australia', Hemisphere, Sydney, Vol. 10, No. 10, Oct. 1966, pp. 19-26.

13. Tonkin, J.E., 'Aborigines in the Mining Industry – An Industrialist's Viewpoint', Aborigines in the Economy, p. 239.

14. McKenzie, P., 'Aborigines in Industry – Groote Eylandt'. Aborigines in the Economy, p. 251.

15. Hennessy, E.F., 'Some Problems of Aboriginal Employment in the Northern Territory', Australian Territories. Canberra, Vol. 4, No. 4, July 1964.

16. Saini, B.S., Bayly, J.J., and Cochrane, R.H., 'Lake Tyers: Some Notes on the Development of the Aboriginal Settlement'. University of Melbourne. Supplement to the Report of the Lake Tyers Planning and Action Committee on Rehabilitation and Training for Aborigines at Lake Tyers Reserve, Aboriginal Welfare Board of Victoria, 1966.

17. Berndt, R.M., The Effect of Area Development on Australian Aborigines – Paper contributed to Project Southern Star. Symposium on Inter-disciplinary Projects for Development in the Northern Territory and Western Australia; conducted by International Biophysical Research Inc. (Ed. W.Z. Lane), Stamford, Connecticut, US, also published in Aborigines in the Economy, pp. 304.

18. Williams, G., 'A Black Ghetto in a Red Desert' – Report on the survey of the Aboriginal problems at seven country towns in New South Wales; Nowra, Cowra, Wilcannia, Walgett, Moree, Armidale and Kempsey. The Australian, Canberra, Jan. 4, 1965, p. 7.

19. Forsyth, C., Report on the Living Conditions of 'The Gurindjis at Wave Hill Cattle Station', in the Northern Territory. The Australian, Canberra, Oct. 18, 1966, p. 7.

20. Tatz, C.M., Aboriginal Administration in the Northern Territory of Australia, 1964. Ph.D. Thesis, Australian National University, p. 142 (unpublished).

21. People and Living – Science and Technology for Development: Report on the United Nations Conference on the Application of Science and Technology for the Benefit of Less-developed Areas. UN Publication, E/CONF. 39/I, Vol. 5, New York, p. 170.

Four Comments on
Aboriginal Housing in Australia -An Architect's View

The Hon. C.E.Barnes,
Minister for Territories

Mr Saini's challenge to architects to contribute towards solving the social and economic problems facing aborigines is a refreshing one which I hope will be taken up by members of the profession desirous of assisting aboriginal advancement. In describing these problems Mr. Saini is right to put them in the context of Government policies for the advancement of aborigines and the general situation of aborigines throughout Australia. There is too frequently a lack of recognition that questions of aboriginai housing in particular are "part and parcel" of the wider changes taking place amongst aborigines. We are today in a situation of rapid change in our own society which will continue to impinge upon the lives of aborigines even in remote areas.

Mr Saini says that the assimilation policy seems to have failed to achieve its original aims. If he means that all aborigines are not now participating in the wider Australian community on equal terms with other Australians he is of course right. But it was never conceived that this could possibly be achieved within a decade or so. It has been achieved with some individuals. I believe that in general, progress is being made, although I, with Mr Saini, would like it to go faster.

In working towards this objective, economic advancement by the aborigines in obtaining higher wages or establishing themselves in business is needed. Governments can assist by training in the acquisition of working skills and by providing finance to ameliorate aboriginal housing conditions. There are also psychological, cultural and social problems to be overcome. Especially in the northern parts of Australia where the former nomadic life of the aborigines has broken down most recently, many aborigines have yet to become fully accustomed to permanent dwellings or the use of furniture and modern amenities. Mr Saini himself seems to acknowledge that for many aborigines in the remoter areas a suitable solution may not be to reproduce a house from suburban Australia.

There is a great need for well-designed good standard transitional housing meeting the present needs and capacity of the aborigine which he can add to or improve himself in time. Architects can assist welfare administrations in designing suitable new housing along these lines and modifying existing housing.

There is great diversity among the various groups -aboriginal and part-aboriginal in varying degrees-making up the aboriginal people of Australia. Mr Saini appears to acknowledge this diversity. I suspect from his various references that he has most clearly in his mind the aborigines of the Northern Territory where the Commonwealth Government has administra-

tive responsibility for aboriginal advancement. Here too there is tremendous variation in the size and scope of the problem, as between aborigines on remote settlements and missions, those working on cattle stations and town-dwellers.

Most of the part-aborigines of the Northern Territory (who would generally be thought of as aborigines in the southern States) and a number of aborigines live in their own or Housing Commission homes in Darwin and Alice Springs. Meeting in Perth recently Commonwealth and State Ministers responsible for aboriginal affairs recorded that an estimated more than 1,000 aborigines and part-aborigines were living in normal community standard housing.

For those who have yet to make this advance I would support Mr Saini's conclusion that a possible solution to problems of recently nomadic groups could well lie in a modest approach to environmental design concentrating on supplying essential needs, and using methods by which the aboriginal himself may be able to build or assist in building his house and thus build also his self respect.

E.G.Whitlam

The Leader of the Opposition

By directing attention to a specific question, in this case that iof housing, Balwant Saini effectively provokes examination of many of our general impressions about aboriginal welfare.

This is the real value of this kind of study, as Balwant Saini himself says, his study does not attempt to supply all the answers to all the problems involved.

The first step is to make sure that we ask the right questions, which is something we in Australia have not often succeeded in doing when dealing with aborigines or their needs.

The overwhelming majority recorded in favour of the May referendum on aborigines, paradoxically, holds an element of risk, the risk that we should imagine that the mere fact of having passed the referendum so decisively was an intrinsically constructive act in itself. It is at best a declaration of intention, and specifically, an instruction to the Commonwealth that it should accept a wider measure of responsibility.

As far as housing is concerned, Balwant Saini generally appears to favour a “modest” approach. I would be concerned however that a “modest” approach would tend, in the present context, to be merely a parallel of our “modest” approach towards the provision of all other forms of social capital such as education, employment and health. A modest approach in Australia too often means the combination of general benevolence with particular indifference. In other words, it can too often be an excuse for doing relatively little. Perhaps the most fruitful line of thought Balwant Saini suggests is that we should realise that the kinds of problems involved are not unique to Australia. The difficulties are not unique even if our manifold and manifest failures to deal with them are.

C.D.Rowley
Director Social Science Research Council of Australia
Aboriginal Project

One heartening thing about this article is that it has been written by an architect for the professional journal. I support Mr Saini's assumption that here is a challenging architectural problem, with perhaps uniquely difficult social and economic complications.

I will not enter into what seems to me mainly a semantic argument about the relative merits of 'assimilation' and 'integration'. The main point is that governments are committed to equality of status and opportunity: although there remains, to varying degrees in different States, protective-restrictive legislation which has ossified into an important hindrance to the attainment of aboriginal equality (perhaps the State of Queensland, having in the past committed more to efforts which assume the necessity of tuition before equality, is proving most reluctant to change).

Many of the dilemmas about aboriginal housing (and other needs) arise from the continuation of this legislation, in a complex involving multi-purposed special administrative departments for aboriginals, generally with low priorities and limited funds. The very existence of these authorities cause other government agencies to assume that aboriginal needs are something apart from the general need. Prejudice, special laws, past methods of administration, including the habit

of placing aboriginals in special multi-purposed institutions for ‘indoor relief1, in the kind of accommodation which then seemed ‘suitable’ for people whose needs were assumed to be limited -all have contributed to the present desperate situation.

Then there has been the annual influx of a European migrant group, of about the size of the aboriginal population indicated by Mr Saini. Does the European migrant now have higher priority, as he has had since the first European settlement?

Aboriginal priorities, in the areas where aboriginals form the stable work-force in the cattle industry, appear to have remained so low that even the minimum requirements of the law have quite generally been evaded or ignored. Even in new mining towns in the north, there have been indications of how the old pattern of aboriginal fringe settlement may develop.

Yet, from the moment when a family retires from the nomadic life, and the safety of that life, new conditions of safety (if we are really concerned for equal chances of survival) become essential. For the results of past failure to see the point, look at the health records of aboriginal settlements and missions from the first years of European settlement. Even more today than earlier, the towns are the economic growing points for all Australians: and there is no longer a viable alternative to the cash economy.

The fringe settlement reflects the fact that aboriginals (and part-aboriginals) have to live somewhere in the towns to live at all. The extent to which aboriginal needs will vary from those of other Australians seems to me not primarily a matter for consultation between architects and other experts: but certainly one for consultation between architects and aboriginals.

This brings us to the core of the problem- that for complex reasons, aboriginals, while identifying in many ways as separate groups, lack effective decision-making machinery of their own (within which leadership may develop, leaders win the confidence of followers, and decisions be made) which may engage in face-to-face negotiations with governments, voluntary bodies, and experts. In my opinion, the development of such institutions has to begin at the 'grass-roots', in the limited, local, town situation, to meet and negotiate with the town council, the police, health authorities, welfare organisations, and the like. They might link up into wider, eventually State-wide and perhaps Commonwealth-wide organisations to negotiate and consult with governments. I can see the enormous difficulties; but no other way.

If this is not possible, I can see no way of beginning to formulate aboriginal needs. But to the extent that this is possib'e, there will be organisations with which architects (and others) mightconsult about what kinds of housing are needed, which might be subsidised with government loans or grants for purchase of houses or components, and entrusted with some as-

pects ofhousing administration (such as rent collection) by the government housing authority.

In a recent survey of the situation of part-aboriginal families in New South Wales, in country towns and other non-metropolitan situations, for the Social Science Research Council Aborigines Project, we found some indications that aboriginal needs may be different from those of other Australians not for different items, but in a quantitative way. Fifty-three per cent of the occupants of dwellings, for instance, were under fifteen years of age.

Over one third of dwellings were built, by occupiers, of scrap materials, apparently in part from the town tip; and most of these were precariously (in view of the health and building regulations) sited on land over which the household head had no legal control. Visitors were frequent (aboriginals in general not being welcome hotel guests). Grandfathers and grandmothers were part of the household; their consignment to the old folks' home and to the senior citizens club being unthinkable by the standards of aboriginal mores.

We counted all internal divisions as rooms; and found that there was an average of 1.6 persons per room. The corresponding census figure or other Australians, which excludes bathrooms and pantries was .69 persons. So there will generally be a need for a larger (and cheaper) house than for the average family; and the contrast of need with present situations is greater than for the general community.

Part of the non-aboriginal folk-lore is thataboriginals like to crowd into houses. If they get larger houses, according to this myth, they proceed to have their friends and relatives to live with them. We looked into this and this is what we found:-

SIZE OF DWELLING	% OF DWELLINGS	% OF POPULATION
Over 1200 sq. ft.	8.19	8.87
600 to 1200 sq. ft.	59.01	61.17
Under 600 sq. ft.	32.79	30.42

This suggests that, contrary to the folk-lore, an aboriginal family which acquires a larger home spreads out and enjoys it. Needs may prove to be different in other ways; but just how they vary from one place to another may best be determined through the development of new kinds of institutions, allowing for consultation. In the centre and north of Australia, the housing situation for aboriginals seems beyond any possibility of presentation through sophisticated statistical measurement. But if anyone doubts the quite definitely felt need for housing (and for other material advantages) he might glance at the Report of the Select Committee of the Commonwealth Parliament on Yirrkala. In a historic and quite moving confrontation of Parliament with a most remote aboriginal community, members of the committee heard of quite sophisticated requests for houses and for other buildings, as part

payment for land to which the people were asserting rights based on prior occupation.

There will certainly be a special problem of transition, whatever is to be done. How may the shack most safely and rapidly be replaced with a dwelling, which makes the safeguarding of health, and the socialisation of children, easier than it now is? Is it possible, as an urgent interim measure, to design cheap and attractive housing components, which may be assembled and re-assembled according to changing needs and sites? Can such components be sold to local aboriginal companies, or other corporate bodies, subsidised by government loans or grants through the general housing authority in each State? There would of course be a much wider need than that of the aboriginal: and so much the better, if by such means some interim answer may be found for a general problem of non-metropolitan housing.

Charles Perkins

Manager, Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs, Sydney

Mr Saini gives a general account of some of the more fundamental social issues pertaining to aboriginal affairs in Australian society today. He certainly has some knowledge of the question he has under analysis. His consideration of the integration-assimilation debate is most important and should be given consideration by individuals in such an area of responsibility. Also his suggestion of the need for a change in the at-

titude of the ordinary white Australians, recognised by many as basic to any social re-organisation which may take place in aboriginal affairs, is important.

The recent referendum suggests such a change is taking place: nevertheless, this alone is not enough. This factor must be merely a segment of a broader national programme -a significant section being increased Federal involvement. There are difficulties naturally in the rehabilitation of any minority group -especially when society has ignored them for so long. With the aboriginal people of Australia, this is most evident. In my own estimation the factors which should command most attention in Australia are:-

Education (a) Scholastic, 3 levels and (b) social, e.g., health, home economics, etc.

Physical environment of the aboriginal people, i.e., housing in reference to design and area.

Employment (1) Acceptance of and (2) training for complete and satisfying employment.

Mr Saini does not focus enough attention on education in his article. He tends to have his emphasis on housing and employment, which he does cover reasonably enough. He gives Groote Eylandt as one good example of employment of aborigines. Undoubtedly there are others. However, the general situation particularly in the rural Northern areas, is one

where low wages and poor employment conditions exist. The Federal Government recently is giving some good leadership in reference to wages and therefore it may be only a matter of time before wages improve. This is not necessarily so for conditions.

Mr Saini points to the fact that most settlements or missions have not yet exploited their “economic potential”. This is obvious when one considers the lack of employment opportunities and low education that exists on various missions and settlements. There is simply no economic foundation upon which a community cc n build. There are no real educational, employment or social “guidelines” for the individual or the community. It is more a case of piecemeal programmes and financial insecurity, both for the responsible authority- be it a church body or the government itself -and the aboriginal people.

The housing of aboriginal people in Australia presents one of the most complex problems in the field of social welfare. The article reveals some of the fundamental mistakes that have been made by policy makers and administrators. “Transitional” housing of the type found on many reserves or missions is just not practical or realistic. Usually “the attitude of the aborigines towards housing” is generally ignored. Transitional housing is considered an essential element in all or most programmes which claim to “elevate” the aboriginal people. The reverse is usually the case. It does not “elevate” the aboriginal people -it degrades.

The family and its members find great difficulty in adjusting to poor grade and unhealthy living quarters. The only real training one gets in transitional homes is on how to become a poorly educated, frustrated misfit.

To conclude, it must be realised proper education, housing, employment and dignity are most difficult elements to realise in aboriginal affairs. But they are attainable with the right people (mainly aboriginals) and the right political and social atmosphere. Perhaps the dawn of a new era is with us-another 6 months of endeavour will tell.