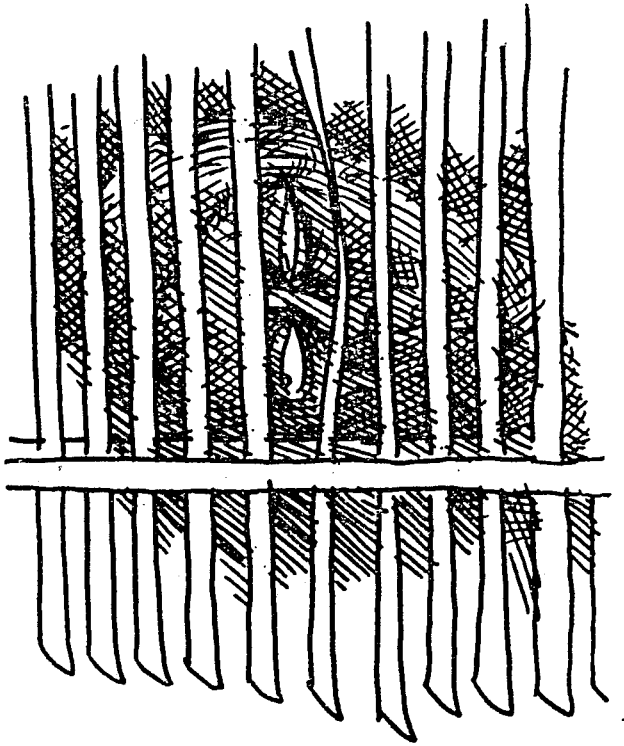


The Half-Gallon Quarter-Acre Paulova Paradise

by Austin Mitchell

illustrated by Les Gibbard
pub. Whitcombe and Tombs Limited
1972



The home is the focus of the nation's life. Other countries go out for entertainment—Englishmen to sit in pubs, Ulstermen to murder each other in the streets. Kiwi homes are so much bigger, better and more beautiful, veritable people's palaces, that the occupants don't want to leave. The homes are also so expensive they can't afford to. The home is the venue for their most popular forms of entertainment: television, gardening and peering out of the window. It's also a hobby you inhabit, and so exhausting that no New Zealander ever calls his house 'Mon Repos'.

Americans flee the noisy cities to the quiet of suburbia. If you want weekend peace you must go to town. The suburbs are a cacophony of power drills, motor mowers, hammers, car-pet and child beating and revving cars, all punctuated by the screams of amateur roof menders falling to their deaths. A New Zealand house begins life as a 1,000-square-foot wood or brick box, sitting in a sea of mud and rubble rather like Passchendaele. Within months the garden is a condensed and improved version of Versailles, likely to turn Capability Brown green with envy. Hand-manicured lawns get more care

and attention than the owner's hair. Vegetable gardens carry a crop large enough to feed the entire Vietcong for decades.

The house's turn comes next. First a decoration, then an extension and enlargement, then an extension and enlargement to the extensions and enlargements. Once the major work is done, maintenance, redecoration and the addition of the occasional bedroom or bathroom keep things going until it's time to move on and begin over again. The Englishman's home is his castle. It's the New Zealander's mistress.

All this he does himself. In countries where work is highly specialised, do-it-yourself is a kind of escape from specialisation of labour, a return to craftsman traditions. The man who spends his life on a car conveyor belt tightening, or in Britain half-tightening, the fourth fender junction bolt can recapture the joy of being a jack of all trades. In New Zealand work isn't specialised. The only division of labour is the relationship between Tom Skinner and Norman Kirk. It is a nation of all-rounders who have to repair cars, build houses or decorate them because no one else will do it for them. Break down by the roadside and any passing driver can repair your car; one astute Englishman took a wreck from the scrapyard, dumped it by a country road, and by the time the twentieth passing driver had contributed his skills he had a machine capable of 0.60 in 10 seconds and 58.5 m.p.g.

I still remember the hysterical laughter on the other end of the line when I rang a Dunedin plumber to ask him to put a washer on the tap. My inability at gardening was a short-lived joke until the landlord realised that the psychosis was incurable. Then it became a subject for hostile comments and surreptitious dawn visits to do the garden with muffled mower while I slept. I was lucky. One friend allowed his garden to get into such a state of neglect that the neighbours



The Quarter Acre Paradise Thirty Years On

The diagram below is taken from a humorous account of New Zealand society, The Half-Gallon Quarter-Acre Paylova Paradise, written by Austin Mitchell in 1972. It shows New Zealanders engaging in various week-end pursuits on their then typical quarter acre sections¹.

Activity 1

Look carefully then list ten activities you see people doing. For example there is a man fixing his roof. Do you think these are things people in Ambrico Place would be doing in their week-ends? Say why or why not for each activity you have listed.



¹ A quarter acre is about 1/10th of a hectare

Activity 2

Read the extract from Austin Mitchell's book. And answer the following questions.

1. "Mon Repos" is French for "my rest". Why would a New Zealander not give this name to his house?
2. "The Englishman's home is his castle. It's the New Zealander's mistress." What does this tell us about the attitudes they have to their homes?
3. Why does the plumber laugh at him?
4. Some of the references in this extract may be unfamiliar. Choose four from the list and write a sentence saying who or what they were:
 - (a) Ulstermen
 - (b) Passchendaele
 - (c) Versailles
 - (d) Capability Brown
 - (e) Vietcong
 - (f) Tom Skinner
 - (g) Norman Kirk
 - (h) a "bottler"
5. How big is 100 square feet? Convert the size to square metres. Does this seem a big or small house?
6. How have attitudes changed? Write a sentence about each of two attitudes or activity that you think would no longer apply.