AS I write this, the shock waves from the recent bushfires in Victoria are still reverberating around the country and beyond, and the leaders of our profession – who doubtless will eventually find themselves having to deal with the implications – have yet to make any significant public statement or response. Yet it is already clear that, both in their terrifying speed and ferocity and in the scale and horror of the human cost, these were no ordinary bushfires, the catastrophic effects of which call into question Australians’ most cherished values and myths regarding the location and shape of their homes.

The Great Australian Dream of the detached house in the suburbs has deep roots in the Australian psyche and has taken many forms, most of them famously derided by Robin Boyd in the 1950s and 60s. More recently, however, the dream has acquired a new respectability, embodied in exquisitely designed homes nesting in the bush on the urban fringes, the most prominent of which have attained iconic status in Australian architecture. Lovingly published and republished in both the professional and popular press, spawning countless lesser variations, these dwellings provide the promise of living in harmony with nature while still enjoying the benefits of the nearby city and have drawn growing numbers of homebuilders further and further out into the receding forests.1

It was always a risky proposition, but the full dangers of living in a tinderbox have only now begun to sink in, driven by a growing awareness that, unless drastic remedial action is taken, climate change can only make things, much, much worse in the future. "Life or lifestyle, warns fire chief" proclaimed one headline, sweeping away any lingering pretensions that fringe dwellers may have had that they could safely live among the trees in the increasingly hotter and drier Australian climate. Much of the press commentary has focused on comparisons between ‘Black Saturday’, as the latest tragedy is now called, and the earlier disastrous bushfires of ‘Black Friday’ in 1939 and ‘Ash Wednesday’ in 1983, suggesting an infrequent pattern of the most serious fires occurring every few decades.
-- little comfort for current victims, but sufficient reason for more complacent minds to argue that they go with the territory and are therefore somehow acceptable.

As one astute observer has pointed out, however, the more accurate comparison is not with those earlier events, but with the much larger fires of 2002 to 2003, which swept uncontrolled for weeks through the south-east, devastating two million hectares of forest. Mostly confined to parks, the loss of life and property was relatively limited and so quickly forgotten; however, the conditions that created and aggravated those fires -- longer droughts combined with high winds and temperatures -- are the same as those that helped spread the most recent inferno, and will continue to threaten life and property as the effects of climate change worsen (note for sceptics: if there is one thing to be learned from the IPCC, CSIRO and Garnaut reports and related studies produced over the past few years, it is that published estimations by scientists of the dire effects of climate change invariably turn out to have been far too conservative rather than exaggerated, and generally underestimate the speed and extent of the underlying causes).

Neither would increasing the controlled burning of undergrowth in line with former Indigenous practice, as promoted by some, including Germaine Greer5 speaking from London -- always ready to share her enthusiasm for native Australian culture from a distance -- improve matters much. Professor Ross Bradstock, director of the Centre for Environmental Risk Management of Bush Fires, who surely knows more than most people about such things, argues that, while fuel reduction should be included in any comprehensive policy of fire prevention and control, other factors play a far more important part in the outcome: "Fires in extreme conditions... can develop their own weather, including winds of tornado strength. Weather becomes the dominant process governing the rapidity of spread and intensity." Bradstock's diagnosis is echoed by Asa Wahlquist, The Australian newspaper's rural writer, who likens the Victoria fires to the so-called 'mega-fires' experienced in California since 2000: "Mega-fires are typically formed from several fires, often covering a huge area. They exhibit complex behaviour, releasing atomic bomb-like amounts of energy. They create their own weather and defy attempts to control them." In such conditions, the appropriate comparison for future megafires of this kind is more likely to be with the uncontrollable firestorm that destroyed Dresden in World War II, rather than with the more benign images of self-renewing forests popular with the controlled burning school.

As a professional critic and consistent advocate for a sensitive but modern interpretation of regional architecture since the early 1980s6, I have admired the work of Australia's leading house designers as much as anyone. It is not so much the quality of the architecture that is in dispute here, but the damaging and dangerous settlement patterns that have transformed the Great Australian Dream into a potential nightmare. Like many new immigrants -- I settled in this country in 2004 and acquired citizenship soon afterwards -- while I consciously chose to live in an urban environment, I also have relatives who migrated here earlier and who are enjoying the same precarious lifestyle on the urban borders that so many other Australians do. I take a guilty pleasure in visiting them in their tree-shrouded homes in the Blue Mountains and in Scotland Island, north of Sydney, while they brush aside my concerns with the hazardous nature of their surroundings with familiar but unconvincing reassurances: "The fire-station is close by" (as though proximity guarantees priority) or "Don't worry, we will be evacuated well before we are in any real danger." Beginning with my first essay for this journal four years ago, 'Too little, too late? The fatal distractions of "feel-good" architecture', I have also taken those concerns to a wider audience. In conclusion, I quote the closing passage from another critical essay I wrote on Australian architecture, in the hope that, late as it is, the trend setting designers of Australia's homes will turn to alternative and safer models:

"Sadly, the maturation of Australian residential architecture coincides with what looks increasingly like the end game in the long struggle to come to terms with the Australian landscape. The problem lies neither in individual projects nor in their designers, but in the detached dwelling type itself, and in the energy intensive infrastructure required to support the low-density settlement patterns it generates. After over two centuries of mostly reckless development, the habitable land and natural resources of Australia, which were always far more limited than the size of the country suggests, have been stretched to the point of exhaustion, with worse to come as the effects of global warming take hold. Most planners and environmentalists in Australia now agree that a sustainable strategy for development must include substantial increases in the density of the urban population, supported by a major shift from private to public transportation -- strategies which directly challenge the Great Australian Dream so eloquently expressed in these houses. How the same architects will respond to the new challenge remains to be seen, but it will doubtless be worth watching."

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