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Re-evaluating the Australian Dream: Narratives of High-rise Living in Torbreck

This paper examines how a building can become an 'institution' in the colloquial sense of that term – less as part of an organisational or governmental establishment, and more as a popular institution. Job and Froud's multi-storey residential tower and slab development Torbreck, completed in Brisbane's Highgate Hill in 1960, was the first of its kind in Queensland. Its reinforced concrete and patterned brick structure, relieved by coloured fin sunshades and flower boxes, have been described as "a new model of comfortable, safe, and gracious living in modern Queensland." High on its ridge overlooking Brisbane from the South, visible from much of the city, the heritage and historic significance of this building is well established. Having been listed in 1999, the Queensland Heritage Register describes Torbreck as having "aesthetic and social significance as a prominent landmark of inner suburban Brisbane." This paper examines the narratives that have elevated Torbreck to this status. Offering an analysis of the sales literature and publicity surrounding the new building, rather than its architectural innovation, coupled with a discussion of a digital story on long term occupation of the building, the paper documents the strategies that positioned the complex as a new model of (family) living in modern Queensland. The paper excavates the story of how a building can become an institution – a place so well known over such a long period, that it has taken on the familiar character of a fixture, whether loved or not – and also begins to explore new methodologies of narrative, memory and social history that will contribute to a deeper understanding of the high-rise apartment typology, its emergence in Queensland, and its occupation.

The high-rise apartment building was a key typology of modernism and remains a ubiquitous form of dwelling globally, in the present day. As described by Florian Urban in his recent book *Tower and Slab: Histories of Global Mass Housing* modern mass housing, and the tower as a particular typology, also has a complex and contradictory history, the detail of which tends to be obscured by notable failures.¹ The reputation of the residential high-rise has been tied as much to culture and perception as experience and fact. Urban's book considers how the multiple histories of mass housing have been defined by "continuous tension between international and local traditions" and the differential success and longevity of buildings in public and private ownership, that reveal disjunctions between the generalisations made about housing typologies and the specific histories of individual buildings.²

In Australia the history of high-density residential, while reflecting an impulse towards modernisation common throughout the world, and well-described by Urban, is also linked with the history of urbanisation in this country and specific debates about densification.³ In these debates the high-rise residential apartment building has had to contend with the potency and success of the 'great Australian dream' and an entrenched image of the domestic in which the well-being of children and the security of the family are served best by the freestanding home on a quarter acre block. The 2007 book *Homes in the Sky* by Caroline Butler-Bowdon and Charles Pickett is the only book to address in a broad way the history of this important housing type, but provides only a partial history, focusing almost exclusively on Sydney and Melbourne.⁴ More, nuanced, specific, and, we would argue, long-range accounts of high-rise apartment living that make use of hybrid methods, are required to better understand the complexity of this typology.⁵

This paper examines Torbreck, a significant mid-century high-rise apartment building located in Brisbane, one of Australia's most urbanised cities but not well known for its high-rise buildings. Constructed in 1958-60, Torbreck was part of the 1950s boom of the high-rise apartment building that resulted from changes in planning legislation, and coincided with the introduction of new financial and ownership models in Australia. It remains somewhat of an anomaly in Brisbane, yet has been largely successful on several measures, including its 1999 listing on the Queensland Heritage Register.⁶ Torbreck effectively employed cutting-edge architectural ideas for the design of high-density residential apartment buildings from Europe and the Americas, despite the architects, Aubrey H. Job and R. P. Froud (Job and Froud) otherwise being predominantly involved in the design of low-rise, detached houses.⁷ However Torbreck's significance is not only related to its innovative architectural design.

This paper argues that Torbreck challenged the Australian institution of the quarter-acre block and the free-standing home with an alternative but appealing, secure and long-term model of residential living, and in doing so gained the reputation of an 'institution' locally. To better understand its success and status as a local institution, this paper explores the strategies embedded within the project, how they promoted and advanced the high-rise residential typology both locally and nationally, and how its desirability has developed over time in the face of the dominant detached suburban model. It also aims to set the scene for a larger analysis of the diversity of occupants the building has supported historically and into

the present, and draws on an in-depth account of the experience of long-term occupants who have made Torbreck their home.

Such a deeper and longer history has relevance today, because it has the potential to reveal connections between the architectural and development vision, marketing strategies, and the lived history of the building, which have ongoing relevance for understanding the dynamics of housing density. It is in the temporal analysis of occupancy that there is also scope to develop new and innovative methods of historical analysis and bring them to bear on our understanding of the ongoing role of this architectural typology in the contemporary city. As noted by Urban at the end of his book: “It remains the subject of speculation what new types of architectural creativity in apartment block design, legislative control and consumer preference will yield, but one can expect that multi-story homes will be increasingly accepted throughout the world.”⁸

The demographics of density

Debates about the suitability of different residential typologies for different demographic groups have historically played a significant role in the evaluation of the alternative models of housing in Australia. For example, at the core of the critique of the ‘flat’ in the first half of the twentieth century was a concern for the physical and psychological development of the child and the positioning of domestic life at the “heart of the nation.” While the ‘flat’, and increased density, evoked for many an image of the slum and its associated diseases, it was also cited as limiting the child’s opportunity to play and as attacking the physical and economic security of the family. An important model of investment for the entrepreneur, the flat failed to offer the family a financially secure, long-term or healthy home.⁹ Such views supported the Australian dream of the quarter acre block and the freestanding home, and limited the early development of the apartment building in Australia, contributing to the nation-wide housing shortage that spanned the Depression through to the post-war period of the 1950s.

The idea that different models of housing should be matched to different demographic groups was also a topical part of the discussion about urban growth after World War II, which now included consideration of the “elevator apartment”. A 1945 diagram by the Brisbane born architect Walter Bunning, an executive in the newly created Commonwealth Housing Commission (established 1945), made this association explicit. Bunning’s diagram made a distinction between “flats” and “elevator apartments”, and also between families with children and those without. Importantly, families with children were excluded from the denser models of dwelling including “flats – 2 and 3 storey” and the high-rise apartment and restricted to lower density models such as the row house (only suitable for families with children under one and half years), “double houses” or free-standing dwellings.¹⁰ This demographic association contradicted the European modernist vision of multi-storey housing typologies, in which various forms of residential high-rise buildings were advocated as a hygienic and family-friendly typology, particularly in the period of post-war reconstruction.

In Brisbane, the case for introducing high-rise residential buildings as a strategy in the

densification of the city engaged both perspectives: it was presented by professionals engaged in city planning debates as a solution to urban sprawl that would also free up existing housing stock for families; but also as a model, when well-designed, that was readily suitable for family living. The Queensland Institute of Architects, and prominent local architects including Robert Cummings (Professor of Architecture at the University of Queensland) and Ron Voller were vocal in their support of flats as an appropriate model of housing for the city. “When you get to a certain size – and I think we passed it long ago – you must have some areas of the city with a higher concentration of population,” Cummings argued in 1953.¹¹ Flats, he suggested, “were vital in a community as big as Brisbane.” Properly designed, they used fewer materials than rows of individual houses. Grouped in units they were also easier and more cost efficient to service than multiple homes. Offering retired couples, empty nesters, newly married couples, bachelors and single woman an alternative to the family home – in keeping with Bunning’s earlier formula – they also freed up existing housing stock for young families.¹²

Cummings and his Queensland colleagues, seeking to expand existing models of dwelling, also argued the suitability of “tall flats” – blocks up to eight storeys high or more – for family living. They pointed to the inner city suburb of Spring Hill, located close to Brisbane’s CBD as a suitable location for such tall flats. “The Hill” was dominated by substandard housing: “rows of mean, unpainted, decrepit little dwellings.” Recognised as “congested, unhealthy, and a fire hazard” the area was also viewed as “no place for children.” In 1951, the English Town planner Sir Thomas Bennett, who was visiting Brisbane at the time, identified the suburb as having the potential to become Australia’s “brightest, most modern residential district.” Shutting the slums of Spring Hill from his mind, and turning mainstream models of dwelling on their head, Sir Thomas saw instead: “wide streets, elegant, tall blocks of flats, gardens, lawns, parks, and children at play.”¹³

Students at the University of Queensland pursued this idea in the 1950s in a study exercise under the direction of Cummings.¹⁴ The undergraduates “‘wiped’ out the ... area bound by Gregory and Wickham Terraces and Water Street”, 80 acres in total, and developed a new and radical scheme for the area. With “plans and scale models, they completely rehoused the 3500 residents.” The “70-year-old ramshackle tenements and tiny cottages” were replaced with eight storey blocks of “super-modern flats” designed to exploit specific climatic conditions of Brisbane. These, it was noted, could be of an “open-type” designed to catch the north-eastern sun in the winter and cooling breezes in summer. Central to the plan were children’s play areas, a swimming pool, shopping centre, restaurants, school, kindergarten, and health clinic. A community block containing a meeting hall, library and cinema was also included.¹⁵ Comfortably accommodating the suburb’s original 3500 residents, the proposed scheme increased the regions density to 150 people per acre. Twenty to twenty-five people per acre was the norm for Brisbane’s post-war suburbs. Arguing that the “new Spring Hill” need not remain a “dream,” Cummings and his colleagues called on the State Government to lift current restrictions on flat construction. While allowing the conversion of old homes into “flats” – which were viewed as “seldom satisfactory and ... destined to become slums” – the construction of new projects remained strictly prohibited in 1950 Brisbane.¹⁶

Both Urban and Butler-Bowdon and Pickett recognise the post-war decades as a period when “mass housing construction reached its peak.”¹⁷ In Australia, influential factors that contributed to this rise include a growing self confidence in modernism and the influence of émigré architects, especially within the context of debates on urban sprawl;¹⁸ a widespread adoption of new building technologies such as reinforced concrete construction; and new entrepreneurial models of property development and the growing influence of property and building companies such as Lend Lease.¹⁹ The success of the new typology in Australia was often dependent on all three factors. Torbreck (completed 1960) was one of the first architecturally significant high-rise residential projects completed in Australia alongside Domain Park in Melbourne (Robin Boyd, completed 1962) and Blues Point Tower in Sydney (Harry Seidler, completed 1962).²⁰

The replacement of company-title arrangements with strata title Laws in the 1960s, a change that made the ownership of individual apartments possible for the first time, coupled with innovations in marketing and publicity, was also significant in broadening the demographics of markets and patterns of ownership for alternative housing typologies.²¹ As Butler-Bowdon and Pickett have demonstrated: “Lend Lease played a leading role in the introduction of strata title” while the “promise of strata title laws produced numerous media reports about this ‘new style of living’”.²²

Torbreck: A new concept of (family) living

In the conception, design and marketing of Torbreck there was a powerful alignment of strategies through which the apartment was presented as a secure and desirable model of home ownership. It was a vision that combined the modernist ideal of high quality, high-density housing provision, with an American vision of the residential high-rise as supporting a leisure-filled cosmopolitan life. Challenging Bunning’s earlier thesis that attached housing types to specific (and fixed) social groups, and recalling the earlier proposal for Spring Hill by students from the University of Queensland, Torbreck was also promoted as a suitable housing type for families with children.

Torbreck was initially proposed in the late 1950s by the developer Rowley Pym. A boundary rider from Western Queensland, Pym is believed to have turned to property development when he fell from his horse and broke his leg. His grandmother, owner of the historic Highgate Hill homestead and original Torbreck (meaning Top of the Hill), is believed to have handed the property over to her grandson to finance his new career. Pym employed Job and Froud to design Torbreck after multiple knock backs by a number of the city’s architects. Frank Salmon, a contemporary of Froud, said of Pym: “It was the vision of Torbreck that moved him and nothing seemed able to stop him.”²³

Torbreck was a fore-runner in new financing models for residential construction in post-war Australia. It was “financed and marketed by Reid Murray Holdings, one of several ambitious and entrepreneurial property companies to emerge during the 1950s and 60s, with profound effects on the apartment building industry.”²⁴ Previously, most major apartment buildings were financed by a variety of private and public investors, content to profit from the rental

income paid by their tenants. In contrast, Reid Murray and similar companies managed both the finance and construction roles, as well as taking a leading role in the promotion and sales of the new apartments. Formed in 1957 from a merger of retailing companies, Reid Murray expanded aggressively into the property and construction industries. It subdivided and sold land and built houses and flats for sale in Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane. It also built shopping centres and hotels.²⁵ Torbreck was Reid Murray's most ambitious apartment project. Its early sales success inspired plans for further Queensland towers using the Torbreck name.²⁶ In 1961 Reid Murray Holdings was the fourth largest Australian-owned company. Two years later it collapsed with losses of almost \$24 million, a victim of the early 1960s credit squeeze as well as the company's reckless fast expansion. At the time, Reid Murray was Australia's largest corporate failure, and it left numerous contractors, mortgagees and shareholders out of pocket."²⁷

Torbreck was constructed at a time when Strata Title legislation was being introduced into Australia. The Strata Title was believed to give greater control and security to individual unit holders, the "ownership of units" and control of the company by unit holders only.²⁸ While Torbreck retained the older organisational structure of the Company Title it straddled the two models by taking on many of the qualities of the Strata Title. As in the latter, efforts were made to stress the ownership of individual units rather than shares within the company. This is reflected in the use of the term "home-unit" rather than "flat" in the promotional literature.²⁹ The management of the company by unit owners was another idea that brought it in line with the Strata model.³⁰

While the organisational structure of Torbreck exploited the shift in attitude towards apartment living that the impending introduction of Strata Title legislation provoked, in keeping the Company Title model, it also demonstrated the ongoing relevance and appeal of one of its prominent and influential features: the incorporation of rules to control the occupancy of the building in the company's articles of association. Recalling earlier calls made by Reverend Trudghan (Superintendent of the Brisbane City Mission) for the character testing or 'grading' of residents in flats to ensure compatibility and the longevity of unit dwelling, at Torbreck, the involvement of the company Board in approving new owners when individual units were eventually sold on, effectively enacted and put in place this process of review.³¹ Torbreck's company title status continues to the present day, despite numerous attempts by sectors of residents to introduce strata-title in the belief it will increase property values. Many residents appear to prefer the benefits delivered by the hybrid nature of the current organisational structure.

Ownership was a key part of the marketing strategy to present Torbreck as a secure and long-term residential model of living. This was particularly important in the targeting of families and single women. An eight page sales brochure simply titled *Torbreck* (n.d) now in the Fryer Library (the University of Queensland), introduced the project as a new "concept of [gracious] living" that overshadowed "all existing and accepted standards" and reflected an elevated and cultivated taste. Technological and design innovations were described in terms

that emphasised how they would mitigate the pressures of high-density living, including the transmission of sound and odours, while exploiting the typology's potential to offer a high level of amenity, convenience, community and security. The pamphlet went on to carefully stress: the ownership of units by titled holders; the luxuriousness of living offered – the resident having “exclusive” access to shared facilities “equal to the best in the world [and] valued at approx. £100, 000”; the project's suitability for singles, married couples without children and larger families with children; the location of the complex in an acre of gardens and incorporation of a children's playground and swimming pool; and access to the most modern of services – including fully plumbed bathrooms (an exciting innovation when much of Brisbane was still unsewered), electric kitchens, scientifically designed drying cupboards and revolving TVs (an emerging technology not only in Brisbane but Australia wide). Shopping facilities, including establishments for “smallgoods, groceries and stationary” plus “a distinctive high class restaurant” providing room service to every apartment and a terrace café and roof garden – “where you can entertain your guests in a manner befitting your most exacting wishes” – were also proposed.³²

The eight page flyer was richly illustrated with drawings of the observation deck and roof gardens – “unrivalled in Australia” – the ground floor boutiques and social lounge (where owners could meet their guests), a large kidney shaped pool encircled by palm trees and a bird's-eye perspective showing the spacious tropical gardens and children's playground. Interspersed throughout the booklet were plans of the various apartment types available in the Tower Block (T1 to T6) and the Garden Block (G1-G8). Apartments ranged from three bedrooms (T6) through to studios and each plan type could be varied to meet the specific requirements of the client.³³ On page 4, the “features that would [make] Torbreck distinctive” were carefully described. These included concrete floors (ready for coverings to be chosen by the unit owner), tiled bathrooms, toilets and kitchen floors, acoustic plaster for ceilings, metal framed doors and windows to balconies, provisions for air conditioning (an optional extra that the unit owner could take up with minimal building work), built in furniture (including wardrobes, storage cupboards, vanity table, medicine cabinet, kitchen cabinets consisting of ant-proof shelves, laminated work bench, servery, china cabinet and cutlery draws), and inbuilt safe, light fittings, wiring for two telephones and a television and a garbage disposal. Mechanical exhaust ventilation would be fitted to extract cooking fumes and odours.³⁴

A second and smaller two-page brochure *Torbreck: A New Concept of Gracious Living* gave attention to the importance of privacy – stating that the “communal life need only extend to your front door” – and safety; the complex offering an “ideal situation for ladies living without menfolk” and those seeking “security and pleasant companionship while retaining perfect privacy.” Flexibility of design – achieved through multiple floor prints and non-load bearing internal partitions – and attention to sound proofing and ventilation, were also highlighted.³⁵ Here too the internal and external features that made Torbreck unique were listed with added attention being given to the use of “automatic lifts with self closing doors,” laundry facilities, including a “home-laundry cabinet that thoroughly washes and scientifically dries all clothes”; sporting amenities “in keeping with the new concept of living that Torbreck introduces” including lawn tennis court, golf putting green, and swimming pool; and

interior décor that was compatible with the individual taste of unit holders.³⁶ Illustrated by a photomontage that made visible Torbreck's location with the city, the proximity to transport (including a taxi rank and tram line with 100 yards of the complex) and the 360 degree views from the observation lounge (taking in the city, the river, and expansive views of Caloundra, the Moreton Bay Islands, Southport and the foothills of the D'Aguilar Ranges) were also highlighted.

Families with children appear to have been targeted as an important new market for the development. This is suggested by the attention given to child-friendly aspects of the design including a children's playground, sporting facilities – especially those with a strong appeal to children such as the pool – the positioning of the complex in an acre of tropical gardens and the inclusion of roof gardens and terraces. All feature strongly in the visual material used to promote the project. The bird's-eye perspectives of the scheme represented on the covers of both "Torbreck" pamphlets allowed the developers to visually draw attention to pool and the gardens. The generosity of the gardens which surround the complex are complimented by elaborate roof gardens and sun terraces. In small cut-aways within the brochure, a perspective of the pool shows children amongst the users. Another reveals the outlines of a children's playground. The latter is repeated in the 10ft scale model that was used to promote the complex at the developer's office in the city. The inclusion of a playground and gardens was viewed at the time as having a remedial effect for children living in flats.³⁷ In an attempt to reassure the buyer, the promotional literature was careful to point out that the playground was "properly planned and equipped under expert guidance."³⁸

The inclusion of many of the leisure facilities also appears to be motivated by their benefit for the child. In a series of draft typescripts for an early advertising campaign, a number of scenarios are constructed to tempt the potential buyer. One, titled "It was the Swimming-Pool that Got Me In," highlights the appeal of the pool for a man with children. Unable to ever afford a pool of his own – "my income just didn't run to providing swimming pools," – his purchase of an apartment at Torbreck provides his children – "both of them mad about swimming" – full time access to a pool: "the Torbreck one."³⁹

While much of the promotional literature for Torbreck was orientated towards the buyer and future resident, a second body of literature, coupled with clever marketing strategies was designed to "bring the public along" on the architectural and housing revolution the project suggested. This was initiated in the early stages of the project and continued through to the occupation of units by new residents. It reinforced the effectiveness of the Torbreck vision in offering a viable alternative to the great Australian dream and contributed to Torbreck's early popularity as a new landmark for Brisbane.

Central to the marketing of the project was the public display of a 10 feet high scale model in the company's city office. A second smaller plastic model made to 1/16th inch scale was displayed in the site office. While images of the former were reproduced in the local papers, it was also placed on the back of a truck and driven through Brisbane.⁴⁰ Following the public display of the model the name "Torbreck" reputedly became the "most popular lottery syndicate in the Queensland Capital."⁴¹

Seeking to advance and build upon this initial success, a viewing platform was built on-site for the public to monitor the construction of the project while regular updates were given in the local papers on the innovative construction techniques – lift slab construction – and materials used.⁴² These were set against articles with double page spreads in the leading women's magazines. In one such article for the *Woman's Day* Torbreck is described as a "white flower bedecked building," Australia's "highest skyscraper" and as offering a unique "lifestyle unprecedented in Brisbane." It was also noted that some large units, "at 1,572 square feet [are] were bigger than the average Brisbane home" and had "unparalleled views," while the observation deck and roof gardens would reveal on a clear day vistas to the northern beaches: "at night they will look down on the million light diamonds of the city and its suburbs and winding river."⁴³

While the financial crisis that overtook the developers in 1963, one which saw the non-payment of the architects,⁴⁴ the bankruptcy of the builder,⁴⁵ and the removal of many of the more ambitious components of the design including the roof gardens, the ground floor shops and restaurant, basement laundry, putting green and the provision of full room service, the building nonetheless retained and built on its status as a landmark residential development in Brisbane.⁴⁶ Prior to the project's completion, the housing scheme was also connected to the state's forthcoming Centenary (1959) and the region's coming of age. Promoted at this time as the "greatest single contribution to home development in Queensland," it was also offered as a model for future schemes under the Torbreck brand including developments at Surfers Paradise and Burleigh.⁴⁷ In 1962-63 the Garden Block part of Torbreck was awarded a Royal Australian Institute of Architects (Queensland Chapter) commendation.⁴⁸

Torbreck as lived-experience

One feature of the building's design that played an important role in reinforcing Torbreck's status as a landmark residential development was the incorporation of a viewing lounge or observation deck at the pinnacle of the tower block. This was a civic design gesture that appears also to have had a public function in the early life of the building. Drawing on Highgate Hill's reputation as a 'look out' for Brisbane,⁴⁹ the development sought to capitalise on this association by incorporating a viewing lounge on the 22 floor of the tower block. Offering the residents 'unrivalled' views of the city and its environs – including the river, Moreton Bay and surrounding mountain ranges – the observation deck was also opened to the public when the project was first completed. Hoards of Sunday tourists, it is reported, flocked to the building to ride the modern lift and to experience the views. A caretaker was appointed to manage the crowds.⁵⁰ While the shopping precinct, restaurant and café planned for the ground floor were never completed, they hint at an additional early intent to open the complex at some levels to the wider public.

Around this same time, multiple articles appeared in the city's newspapers documenting the movement of tenants into the block and the success of the modern lifestyles they had chosen. In "At Home ... in the clouds with a sunset at your feet," Grace Garlick outlines for the reader the wonder of penthouse living:

Take a deep breath. Press a button and move gently upwards, 324 feet, in the sky. Open a door and you are looking at a cloud. Actually you are looking at a filmy white curtain moving gently in the penthouse 20th storey apartment which Mr and Mrs Michael Carlos and their three teenage daughters call 'home' at the top of Torbreck.

Drawing again on the themes of home ownership and the occupation of apartments by families with children – teenagers in this instance – the article also evokes the glamorous lifestyle the building offered: “Think back to those films ‘How to Marry a Millionaire’ or ‘Gentleman Prefer Blondes’ and the glamorous penthouse apartments filmed in New York – and you got the picture.”⁵¹ Other contemporary writers choose however to focus on the more practical aspects that the building offered. “No Mowing or Weeding for these high level gardeners” proclaimed one while another revealed a “sea of red roofs – a characteristic of most Australian cities” as seen from the balcony of a Torbreck apartment. The first is illustrated by images of women caring for the planter boxes found on each balcony. A couple enjoy the view in the latter, the woman reclining in a Knoll Hardoy Butterfly chair.⁵² The overwhelming focus in each is Torbreck’s women residents and the new models of domesticity the complex promoted.

An early occupant of Torbreck was Elsie Brooks. Local salon owner and small businesswoman, Elsie lived in Torbreck from the early 1960s, when she first purchased her recently completed apartment, until 1994. Her story demonstrates the success of the marketing campaign and a trend towards long term occupancy that appears to have characterised the early purchase of Torbreck apartments.⁵³ For much of her life Elsie was a single professional woman: independent, lively and immersed in the cultural life of Brisbane. Arriving in Australia from England, and training as a hairdresser in Sydney, Elsie moved to Brisbane and established a prosperous career initially as a mobile hairdresser with a clientele amongst Brisbane’s elite, and then with her own salon in Rowe’s arcade in the Brisbane CBD.⁵⁴ She was active in the professional world of hairdressing, contributed to the regulation of training, took on apprentices, edited a professional hairdressing journal and judged competitions.⁵⁵ She was also a member of the Business and Professional Women’s Club.⁵⁶ She was involved in the Brisbane Repertory Theatre Company (established in 1925 by speech and drama teacher Barbara Sisley and English literature professor Jerimiah Stables later becoming the La Boite theatre in 1956) and the Brisbane Arts Theatre (established 1932), and had a role in starting the Twelfth Night Theatre in 1969. She taught elocution (in conjunction with her involvement with the Repertory Theatre) and collected the work of local artists including Margaret Olley. She was a friend of Jesse Groom, Lady Mayoress, whom she met during the war years.⁵⁷

At the age of 60, Elsie married Dr Owen Jones, divorcee and Reader in Geology at the University of Queensland and the couple moved into the newly completed Torbreck.⁵⁸ The couple had bought their apartment from the building’s plumbing contractor who had been given the property in lieu of payment for work on the building, after the building company Kratzmans went bankrupt. Owen had watched Torbreck’s progress from across the river while working at the University of Queensland.⁵⁹

Torbreck soon became the focus of Elsie's extended family. Their story is told by Heather Lee (nee Macdonald), Elsie's niece by marriage and former employee. Heather, her husband John, and their three children would visit Torbreck, frequently making use of the balcony and gardens for family gatherings. It was the setting for celebrating significant family events such as John's graduation from the University of Queensland, and birthdays.⁶⁰ It reminded Heather and John of earlier times spent in London: "it so reminded me of Dolphin Square in London and John's father was the accountant at Dolphin Square and his mother was the manageress of the restaurant in Dolphin Square."⁶¹

Through Elsie and Owen, other academics and hairdressers moved into Torbreck, a pattern that was reflected in the early ownership of the building more generally.⁶² They would make use of the BBQ hut in the garden for social gatherings.⁶³ Heather recalls that there were a "there were a lot of doctors in this building. And, because the Mater Hospital was so close, they could almost walk to work, there were. And, nurses too."⁶⁴

Elsie lived in the building for over 30 years. Heather moved into the building when Elsie moved to a retirement home in the early 1990s. In that time Heather has noticed how: "the people have changed and we now have more young people in the building. Even little babies now. We didn't have little children much in those early days, but young business women on their own would enjoy living in Torbreck because they didn't have to do gardens or look after the pool."⁶⁵ Elsie (from mid 1980s after Owen's death) and Heather (after John's death) both lived in the building as single women.

Conclusion

Elsie and Heather's story reflects many of the original ambitions of Torbreck's developers and encapsulates a new model of living that successfully united the home-unit or flat with domesticity, family life and long term, owner-occupier residency. In doing so it reveals the success of Torbreck in reworking the institutions of home-ownership and family living within Queensland. Located, however, at the nexus of lived reality and 'vision' their stories also draw attention to ideas and themes that have yet to be fully explored in the Torbreck story. These include the appeal of the complex to business women, both single and married, the association of the complex with specific professions, including academics, doctors, and hairdressers – and more recently architects – and the engagement of this community with the Arts (and especially the visual arts and theatre). Hinting at a deeper and more complex history, these stories also demonstrate the need to move beyond the architectural form and the text to fully comprehend the richness and complexity of the institution that Torbreck has become.

1 Florian Urban, *Tower and Slab: Histories of Global Mass Housing* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012).

2 Urban, *Tower and Slab*, 13.

3 Robert Freestone, *Design Australia's Cities: Culture, Commerce and the City Beautiful, 1900-1930* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2007).

- 4 Caroline Butler-Bowdon and Charles Pickett, *Homes in the Sky: Apartment Living in Australia* (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2007).
- 5 Caroline Butler-Bowdon, "Sydney Apartments: The Urban, Cultural and Design Identity of the Alternative Dwelling 1900-2008" (PhD thesis, University of New South Wales, 2009).
- 6 <https://heritage-register.ehp.qld.gov.au/placeDetail.html?siteId=16019> (accessed February 2015).
- 7 Susan Ferguson, "The Residential Design Legacy of R. P. Froud" (BArch thesis, University of Queensland, Brisbane 2001); Andrew Wilson, "Torbreck: Projections of Californian Landscape and Ultramodern Lifestyle," in *Skyplane: What Effect do Towers have on Urbanism, Sustainability, the Workplace and Historic City Centres*, ed. Richard Francis Jones, Lawrence Neild, Xing Ruan and Deborah van der Plaats (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2009), 132-143.
- 8 Urban, *Tower and Slab*, 175.
- 9 "An Invention of the Devil," *Sunday Times* (Sydney), April 18, 1920, 3; "Flats not conducive to family life," *Argus*, September 10, 1941, 4; "Smaller allotments," Letter to the editor, *Courier Mail*, July 13, 1953, 2.
- 10 *Dwelling Types Diagram*, originally published in *Architectural Forum* republished in Walter Bunning, *Homes in the Sun* (1945), 6; cited in Butler-Bowdon and Pickett, *Homes in the Sky*, 18. It was assumed that young married couples and singles would eventually have children and need to move into a suitable family home. This implied that "flat" or "apartment" living was temporary and transient. This contrasts to the freestanding family home which when purchased was often assumed to be a life home.
- 11 "City 'at stage where flats are necessary.' 'SIZE TOO BIG FOR POPULATION'," *Courier Mail*, July 4, 1953, 6.
- 12 "Says city on need of flats," *Courier Mail*, October 18, 1950, 3; "Says flats ease city problems," *Courier Mail*, October 20, 1952, 5.
- 13 "The Hill could be THE suburb: Vision of wide streets, tall flats, and gardens," *Sunday Mail*, December 30, 1951, 6.
- 14 Students enrolled in the Architecture degree at the University of Queensland in 1951-52 included Ian Charlton, J. R. Curro, D. A. Nutter, H. J. Davis, C. J. Debham, P. R. Gargett, Miss Anne Greenfield, Miss Margaret Kerr, A. Henzel, B. J. E. Ainsley, M. J. Quinlan. R. P. Froud was enrolled in the Diploma of Architecture, University of Queensland from 1941-44. Student Register, School of Architecture, University of Queensland.
- 15 In this regard the project conforms to Cummings idea on neighbourhood design, see Robert Cummings, "Housing Economics" (unpublished lecture presented to the National Council of Women, 1946, private collection, School of Architecture, University of Queensland).
- 16 "The Hill could be THE suburb," 6.
- 17 Urban, *Tower and Slab*, 13.
- 18 Butler-Bowdon and Pickett, *Homes in the Sky*, 14.
- 19 Butler-Bowdon and Pickett, *Homes in the Sky*, 100.
- 20 Butler-Bowdon and Pickett, *Homes in the Sky*, 103.
- 21 Butler-Bowdon and Pickett, *Homes in the Sky*, 102.
- 22 Butler-Bowdon and Pickett, *Homes in the Sky*, 100-102.
- 23 Craig Johnstone, "In the Clouds," *Courier Mail*, November 25, 2002; "£750,000 Block of 'Home Units,'" *Courier Mail*, October 27, 1957.
- 24 Butler-Bowdon and Pickett, *Homes in the Sky*, 100.
- 25 Butler-Bowdon and Pickett, *Homes in the Sky*, 100.
- 26 "Torbreck: Introduces a New Concept in Home Living," *Courier Mail*, June 8, 1959. These included additional towers at Burleigh and Surfers Paradise. "Torbreck introduces a new concept of Living," advertisement, *Courier Mail*, June 8, 1959.
- 27 Butler-Bowdon and Pickett, *Homes in the Sky*, 100.
- 28 Torbreck Real Estate Brokers, *Torbreck, A New Concept in Gracious Living* (nd) and *Torbreck* (nd), Torbreck Home Unit Collection, Fryer Library, UQFL426, items 54 and 55.
- 29 Torbreck Real Estate Brokers, *Torbreck*, 3; Nan Gorey, "Home in the Sky," *Womans Day*, May 12, 1954, John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland, Acc. 3228 RP Froud Records.
- 30 Torbreck Real Estate Brokers, *Torbreck*, 7.
- 31 "'Grade' Flat People," 3.
- 32 Torbreck Real Estate Brokers, *Torbreck*, preface.
- 33 Torbreck Real Estate Brokers, *Torbreck*, 3.

- 34 Torbreck Real Estate Brokers, *Torbreck*, 4
- 35 Torbreck Real Estate Brokers, *Torbreck, A New Concept in Gracious Living*, 2.
- 36 Torbreck Real Estate Brokers, *Torbreck, A New Concept in Gracious Living*, 2.
- 37 “‘Grade’ Flat People,” 3.
- 38 Torbreck Real Estate Brokers, *Torbreck*, 5.
- 39 “It was the swimming-pool that got me in ...” unpublished typescript, State Library of Queensland, n.d., Froud Architectural Plans, John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland, Box 16014 O/S A3 and (Box 17505 O/S).
- 40 “Work begins on new home plan,” *Telegraph*, September 10, 1958, 2; Photo, Truck bearing Torbreck model through Brisbane,” Torbreck Home Unit Collection, Fryer Library, UQFL426, 12-16. The smaller model is now held in the Torbreck Home Unit Collection, Fryer Library, UQFL426, item. 9022B. The larger model is now lost.
- 41 Gorey, “Home in the Sky.”
- 42 “Work begins on new home plan,” *Telegraph*, September 10, 1958; “£300,000 boom is state wide,” *Courier Mail*, September 4, 1960.
- 43 Gorey, “Home in the Sky.”
- 44 “Two claim fees over Torbreck Building,” *Courier Mail*, John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland, Acc. 3228 RP Froud Records, Box 16014 O/S A3.
- 45 “I’ve Lost £130,000,” *Courier Mail*, John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland, Acc. 3228 RP Froud Records, Box 16014 O/S A3.
- 46 “£9 Million Fades in Reid Murray Wipe Off,” *Sunday Mail*, June 2, 1963, 26; “Home Units Probe,” *Sunday Truth*, November 24, 1963; “Kratzmann’s may get £50,000 aid,” *Courier Mail*, February 15, 1963.
- 47 Torbreck Real Estate Brokers, “Torbreck introduces a new concept of gracious living,” *Courier Mail*, June 8, 1959.
- 48 Torbreck, Queensland Heritage Register, <https://heritage-register.ehp.qld.gov.au/placeDetail.html?siteId=16019> (accessed February 2015).
- 49 The area had historically been associated with Brisbane best ‘vantage point.’ “Highgate Hill,” *Courier Mail*, November 22, 1930, 19.
- 50 Johnstone, “In the Clouds.”
- 51 Grace Garlic, “At Home ... In the Clouds with the Sunset at your Feet,” *Courier Mail*, 1963, John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland, Acc. 3228 RP Froud Records, Box 16014 O/S A3.
- 52 “No Mowing, Weeding for these High-Level Gardeners,” John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland, Acc. 3228 RP Froud Records, Box 16014 O/S A3, “Brisbane, A Bulletin Portfolio,” *The Bulletin*, September 21, 1963.
- 53 Research currently being undertaken by the authors seeks to better understand this trend and to consider its application to present day apartment living.
- 54 Deborah van der Plaats, Susan Holden and Gavin Bannerman, interview with Heather Lee, Torbreck Highgate Hill, May 13, 2014, 9:49.
- 55 She was consulted about the training courses offered through Queensland Central Technical College. This was a five-year training course, compared with two years typical in UK, and was well regarded internationally. Authors, interview with Heather Lee, 55:16. See also “These Woman are the Bosses and the Employees Like It,” *Courier Mail*, July 7, 1954, 10; “Woman Head of Hairdressers,” *Courier Mail*, May 1, 1954, 7.
- 56 Plaats, Holden and Bannerman, interview with Heather Lee, 16:33.
- 57 Plaats, Holden and Bannerman, interview with Heather Lee, 16:59.
- 58 Plaats, Holden and Bannerman, interview with Heather Lee, 19:01.
- 59 Plaats, Holden and Bannerman, interview with Heather Lee, p. 8.
- 60 Plaats, Holden and Bannerman, interview with Heather Lee, 24:11.
- 61 Plaats, Holden and Bannerman, interview with Heather Lee, 6:13.
- 62 Plaats, Holden and Bannerman, interview with Heather Lee, 32:44.
- 63 Plaats, Holden and Bannerman, interview with Heather Lee, 33:08.
- 64 Plaats, Holden and Bannerman, interview with Heather Lee, 46:26.
- 65 Plaats, Holden and Bannerman, interview with Heather Lee, 42:45.