

Don's Party and the AV Jennings 'Type 15' Home

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Australian housing underwent a watershed when 1960s mass-produced houses slowly started subscribing to a new aesthetic of continuous living spaces, known as the 'open plan' home. This created a new landscape for Australian playwrights to observe and explore in their work when representing domesticity on the stage. Instead of representing a single room of the house on the stage, plays such as '*Don's Party*', started to work with a number of openly connected spaces bound by doorways to private sections of the house or to specific outdoor areas. In representing this dialectic between interior and the exterior, private and public spaces in the home, the continuous spaces of the AV Jennings house in '*Don's Party*' acted to blur these conditions creating an outer interior. These connected spaces became the place for an outward performance on the family's interiority, while simultaneously presenting a boundary to an inner interior in the offstage spaces of the home. This paper focuses on the play '*Don's Party*' by David Williamson and how the spatial arrangements of the AV Jennings home, in which it was set, influenced the playwright. The research includes a textual analysis of the play, biographical research and interviews with the playwright alongside an analysis of the spatial arrangements of AV Jennings houses.

Keywords: design, *Don's Party*, David Williamson, AV Jennings 'Type 15' Hme

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Introduction

From the earliest days I was writing Australian plays for Australian people. Australian playwrights before me who were writing consciously for a world market would not put in any local references or place names. They would either locate their plays in hypothetical lands that didn't have place names or in other countries. We had a tradition of that sort of writing, but I've always seen myself as an observer of the life around me and reflecting on that life.¹

In the decades that followed the Second World War Australia turned its attention to the home and the great Australian Dream. It was the home, in particular ownership of the home, which provided a growing nation with a symbol of economic prosperity and stability. Suburbia and its mass produced homes became central to Australian culture and as such played an important role in post war Australian dramatic literature. Ray Lawler epitomised this relationship between the home and Australian culture in his seminal play, *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. Lawler along with suburban satirists Patrick White and Barry Humphries opened the closed walls of colloquial domesticity and suburbia in Australian theatre in the 1950s and 1960s. These performers and writers also positioned Australian culture onto international stages by removing the fourth wall of the suburban home.

With the combined effects of continuing rapid urbanisation and shifting ideologies around domesticity, the 1960s and 1970s brought a new literary landscape for playwrights to explore. This research investigates how the design and spatial arrangements of Melbourne's late modern housing typologies influenced Australian playwrights. The new Melbourne home of the 1960s slowly started subscribing to a new aesthetic of continuous living spaces and patios that extended from the exterior to the interior.⁶ These mass produced homes employed diluted spatial principles of houses designed by modernist European architects, Le

Corbusier, Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe and Adolf Loos in the 1920s and 1930s. In writing about Adolf Loos' concept of the 'Raumplan' and his architecture, Beatriz Colomina explicated this relationship between open plan housing and dramatic art, describing the 'house as a stage for the family theatre'. She also wrote that the inhabitants of Loos' houses were "both actors and spectators of the family scene involved."² These new methods for organising spaces in the home also meant that audiences were becoming accustomed to being spectators over their own domestic setting. It has not been investigated as to whether this new capacity for voyeurism within the home was a catalyst for playwrights to reflect upon, and translate the domestic environment to the stage. This research investigates how emergent open plan housing typologies of the 1960s in Melbourne influenced playwrights through the work of David Williamson and his 1969 play *Don's Party*.

Domesticity, Theatre and The Australian Way of Life

By the end of the Second World War Australia was experiencing an extreme housing shortage that required an estimated 350,000 new homes to house its population. The provision of housing had been marred by a materials shortage as the result of two world wars, the depression and then compounded by a growing population.³ Additionally there was also the clearance of inner city slums whose inhabitants were relocated to the suburbs and a small migration from rural areas to urban centres and suburbia.⁴ This saw a significant increase of home ownership from approximately 47% before the war to more than 70% in the post-war era.⁵ New housing was to be provided by both private developers as well as the commonwealth government in the form of public housing and financial provisions to war veterans.⁶ Housing became an identifier of economic prosperity, it was tied to consumerism and status, which became a large component of shifting ideologies towards domesticity.⁷

Homemakers' priorities shifted from home management to interior decoration for a public home life that illustrated ambition, prosperity and status. John Gawler, practising architect and chair of the Commonwealth housing commission in the 1940s wrote that new ideas for housing came along. They were inspired by plans and photographs published in American magazines. The plans illustrated some valuable attributes; they freed the small house from the drawing room, connected the kitchen to the living room through a door and built in joinery that freed the kitchen of the scullery and the pantry. Gawler wrote that, "The kitchen became a room the housewife could ask her friends to enter."⁸ These spatial principles of the American home described by Gawler encapsulate what Lynn Spigel described as the diluted mass produced versions of the homes designed by the modernists.⁹ Emulating principles of Adolf Loos' Raumplan that prescribed functionality and economy driven planning delivered through continuous living spaces. Although Australia was slow to adopt these new forms of housing, opting for traditional room arrangements with a series of small rooms connected by corridors and hallways. It wasn't until the 1960s, nearly a decade after American housing builders such as the Levittowns had pioneered mass-produced houses with open plan living spaces, that mainstream Melbourne housing typologies transformed.

Architectural theorist, Joan Ockman¹⁰ wrote about changing attitudes to domesticity in the United States driven by women returning to domestic roles after filling non traditional employment during the war. She described it as a second 'separation of spheres' where governments actively marketed home making to women. The separation introduced a consumer oriented domesticity where women were to stay home and consume new products, while men were to work away from the home and produce.¹¹ Consumption tied to femininity and production tied to masculinity, this balance was a sort after remedy for a recovering economy. Similarly in Australia, the Commonwealth housing commission briefly employed modern housing advocate, Mary Ryan, to assist in the development of new housing typologies. Through her position on the housing commission she instigated a number of programs that motivated a change in thinking. She insisted that new

homes had to instil a modern mentality to accommodate the women of war. Women who had fulfilled non-traditional roles throughout the war and were accustomed to sharing many aspects of their lives.¹² Ryan indicated that new housing typologies needed to also accommodate social functionality in their planning.

This opening up of domesticity was also expressed in the endemic phrase of the 1950s, the 'Australian way of life'. Australia's longest serving Prime Minister, Robert Menzies, proudly associated good citizenship and strong nationhood with a high standard of domestic health and comfort. He tied domesticity to Australian societal values in his address titled, "The Forgotten People." In this speech he emphasised the important role of the middle class in defining an Australian identity. He categorised the virtues of the middle class in relation to the home, The Homes Material, The Homes Human and the Homes Spiritual. For Menzies, the Australian way of life was instituted in the home, the home was the foundation of sanity and sobriety.¹³ In 1956 the Australian way of life was on show to the world for the Olympic games and with a shortage of motel accommodation, suburban Melbourne homes were asked to apply to billet athletes and officials in their homes. Menzies supported the efforts of Olympic organisers to engage Melbourne homes in accommodating Olympic guests, in his support he said:

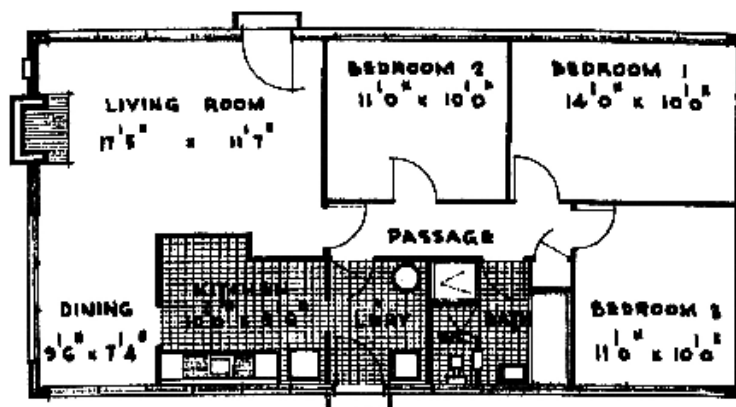
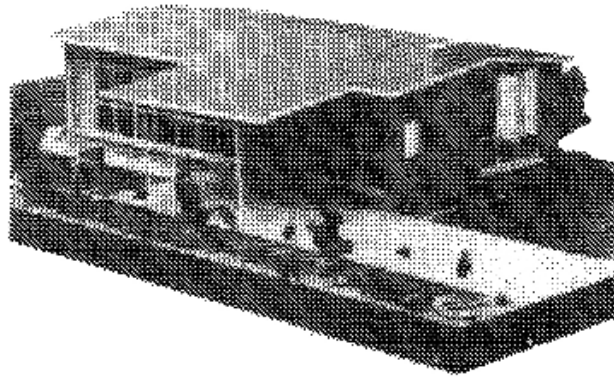
But we have unique standards of home comfort—at all levels, not only in the three-car garages class, but in the carport and carless class as well ... We have, in short, something to show in our homes.....The private citizens of Melbourne could put on a show of domestic hospitality which would open the world's eyes.¹⁴

It was this very event that sparked one of Australia's most famous icons, Dame Edna Everage. Barry Humphries' first stage show for his character Mrs. Norm Everage, of Moonnee Ponds was titled *The Olympic Hostess*. In this show Norm discussed her plans for hosting her Olympic guest including decorating the spare room, complete with wall paper and new chenille blanket.¹⁵ His satirical view of Australian suburbia translated well to international audiences and Mrs. Norm Everage soon became Dame Edna Everage. In the decades that followed the Second World War Australian playwrights such as Patrick White, Ray Lawler and Barry Humphries were using domesticity as the setting for their works. Domesticity and suburbia provided a source for critique, satire and representation of Australian culture and in turn these playwrights were projecting Australian domesticity onto international stages. In their works the living areas of the house were represented as a single room, or two connected spaces and diegetic spaces located upstairs, in an adjoining room, on the veranda or some other external space. This mimicked the architecture of the Australian home of the 1950s representing a series of connected independent rooms.

In the 1960s new housing typologies organised all of the living areas to be openly connected, providing a new domestic living space for kitchen sink dramas—complete with the kitchen sink. These open plan houses were also a platform for social gatherings and parties that spread across three or four spaces of the house. They proffered a different space for the dramatist to work with where multiple interactions between inhabitants of the house could take place creating a complex array of fluctuating relationships between characters. Playwrights in America in Britain were also taking advantage of the qualities of open plan housing, including Mart Crowley and his 1968 play *Boys in the Band*¹⁶ and Mike Leigh's 1977 play *Abigail's Party*.¹⁷ Both of these plays utilise the open plan arrangements of modern housing typologies in which their characters host and attend parties. Where these two plays differ from the Australian context is in the use of spaces on a second floor or referring to diegetic spaces that are upstairs. With so much space for Australian suburbs to sprawl across, suburban houses of the 1960s were predominantly single storey and this was a unique condition of Australian housing.

The single storey home of the Melbourne's early sprawling suburbs is also a departure point from early post war Australian plays in domestic settings, such as Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. Utilising interior

stairs, *The Doll* plays on the same devices as Leigh where the internal offstage spaces of the house are signified by stairs to nowhere. This separation between back stage and on stage are not as clearly defined as the door to the corridor for private spaces in plays such as *Don's Party*. The stairs to nowhere represent an open relationship between one space and another, unlike the door in a wall that signifies a need for permission to move through. The stage directions and actions that take place in David Williamson's play *Don's Party*



draw heavily from this distinctive separation of spaces and presents a unique characterisation of the 1960s Melbourne suburban home.

FIGURE 1: The AV Jennings 'Type 15' or 'Yo Yo' home, the home Williamson occupied in Bundoora that was influential in the development of *Don's Party*.

Modernity and Domesticity in Australia

I think the Australian and American houses of that time were designed with a large kitchen, dining, entertaining area which was open and facilitated social events like parties. The discrete sitting room, drawing room, living room, kitchen and dining room areas being in separate rooms in say Victorian era mitigated against visualising plays with a fluid flow of characters across the stage in different areas but all or most being onstage at all times.¹⁸

The home that influenced the setting for *Don's Party* was Williamson's Bundoora home,¹⁹ a 1968 version of the AV Jennings model of home called the Yo Yo or 'Type 15'.²⁰ For AV Jennings, designing a house was about the internal layout and the external elevations were devised simply in response to public tastes. Albert and Vic Jennings returned to Australia from a study tour of America in 1962 with new ideas for their home designs. From the mid 1960s houses had less dividing walls in larger living areas, kitchens were often separated by only an island bench and in 1968 they released their first model with a split level division, the Doncaster.²¹ These spatial arrangements within the home allowed for stage like platforms and open living areas that accommodated an uninterrupted surveillance of the home. The stage directions in *Don's Party* call for the set to be constructed in such a way that the living room and the kitchen and of the house can be viewed simultaneously.²² The staging requires a number of exits to bedrooms, bathrooms, and a patio. These exits police these boundaries of intimacy. Acts of intimacy are relegated to the off stage private spaces of the house, while the viewable public spaces are for selected perfunctory duties, polite conversations and functionality—the outer interior of the home.

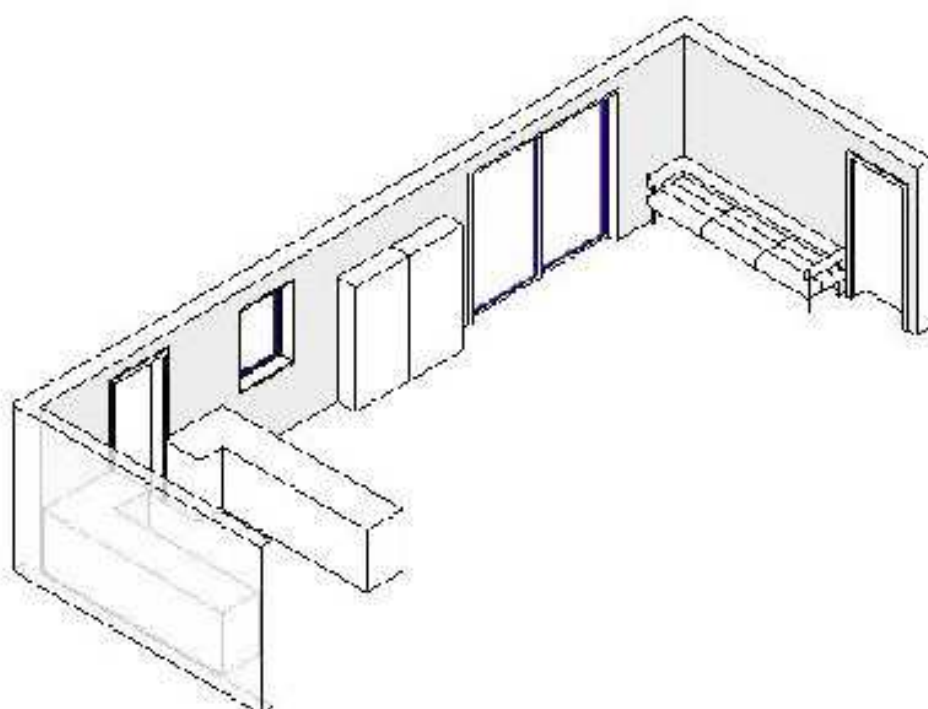


FIGURE 2: Diagram of the set from the stage directions of *Don't Party*, drawn by author

In *Don's Party* there is a division between the visible spaces on the stage and the spaces hidden behind the set used as a device to create tension between the characters. This is mimetic of the spatial arrangements of new housing models developed in the 1960s by project builders including AV Jennings in Melbourne. While the living areas are openly connected, in the Melbourne 1960s home there is a clear definition between the bedrooms and living areas - between the family stage and the spaces hidden from the audience, behind the stage so to speak. As seen in the floor plans for 'Glengarry' from the mid 1960s, the living areas are divided from the bedrooms by a wall with a door. Views to the bedrooms are completely closed off, separating the sites for performance, the living rooms, from the hidden spaces behind the stage set of the home, those being the bedrooms, bathrooms and laundry. In an earlier Jennings model the 'Type 206,' the living areas have been separated by the orientation of living rooms lying perpendicular to the bedrooms. There is also a screening device to the dining room to separate the bedroom corridor from the lounge, withdrawing any opportunity for views to the bedrooms.

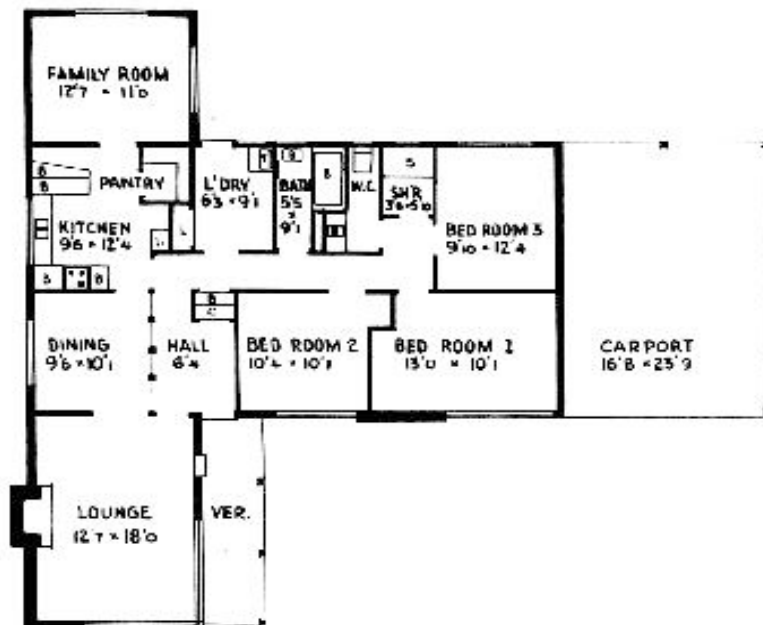
The Jennings homes were by no means a great feat in residential architecture; architects were not involved in the design and developments of these homes. They were heavily influenced by the Levittown homes that Albert and Vic had seen on their study tour in America. However, in comparison to the single storey Levittown's house there is a minor but significant difference in the AV Jennings house. The Levittown's house provided a less defined departmentalisation of the living areas from the bedrooms. While corridors to bedrooms narrowed the view there is no door to segregate the corridor from living areas. The gaze can still flow through to the privacy of the bedrooms and bathrooms. The boundary between these spaces is also punctured by the articulated location of one of the bedrooms, while the AV Jennings home draws a straight and distinct line to form the territories between the public and private spaces within the house. A wall that acts as the back flat of the set, it divides the performance space of the house and the privacy that is behind the set, with its restricted access for the actors in the show, the family. As these houses were designed to remove the need for internal load bearing walls, the origin of this dividing wall is driven by the rarity of two storey homes in Australia in the 1960s. Whereas the American Levittown homes of the 1960s were mostly two or two and a half storey homes, creating a vertical division between the public and private spaces of the home. This pronounced boundary created the theatre box of the 1960s Melbourne home and it was not a single room, but a series of connected spaces that housed the performances of the family in two ways. It controlled and framed the behaviours that were visible to the audience and hid the private tasks associated with the performance behind a wall that separated the spaces on the stage.

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a feature of these houses was the openness and connectedness of the living, dining and kitchen areas with the bedrooms down a corridor at the back. This openness allowed one to think of a set design which occupied the stage and gave several acting areas to operate out of..... cooking and drinks in [the] refrigerator in [the] kitchen....food, (Chips and twisties) laid out in dining area and television watching and political debate in the living area and bedroom antics as with Cooley's seduction of Kerry, going on in the bedroom offstage.²³

On and Off Stage Spaces of the Modern Australian Home

Williamson utilised the dividing wall between the living areas and bedrooms of the AV Jennings home. In *Don's Party* the acts of sex and violence are situated out of the view of the audience. Although the audience are made aware of these events through the dialogue - the living areas are restricted to performances of civility and passivity. This is an important point of difference between *Don's Party* and the work of his predecessors Lawler and White. In the work of Lawler and White the interior environment of the home is heterogeneous where private and public behaviours might flow between on and off stage spaces of the house. The only separation of the 1950s Australian home is simply the dialectic between the interior and the exterior. Whereas Williamson's interior for *Don's Party* is homogenous, separating an inner interior and an outer interior, two enclosed and separated spheres of interaction created by the wall between the living areas and the bedrooms.



The "Type 206"
14 $\frac{1}{2}$ Squares in W.B.
15 $\frac{1}{2}$ Squares in B.V.

FIGURE 3: The AV Jennings 'Type 15' Home

Perhaps, Williamson has carefully constructed this play with the watchfulness of the audience in mind, restricting the characters' on stage interactions and burying undesirable behaviour in the house. It is as though the audience are within the house at Bundoora quietly watching the party unfold and for this reason the actors hide their deepest intentions in the bedrooms, patios and unseen sections of the house. They are seeing the

party through Williamson's eyes, looking in from a vantage on the public sections of the house. In an introductory note Williamson wrote, "It is not a participatory play. We watch the action of other people passively."²⁴ Williamson utilised the dividing wall between on and off stage as a device to create dramatic tension. In this sense the audience are exposed to the tension experienced by the party's attendants as characters appear and disappear from view.

But it was good for the dramatic structure that there were the three main areas the guests could flow between with the fourth offstage area being the bedrooms. Thus interactions could take place between two or three or four guests that the other guests were not privy to. I drew a floor plan and had the characters names on slips of paper which I slid around the floor plan so I knew who was where at any particular time.²⁵

Intimacy and Control

Beatriz Colomina uses the term 'intimacy and control' to describe the spatial tactics inscribed in the open plan houses by Adolf Loos and Le Corbusier.²⁶ Intimacy and control is described as the dual condition of wanting to see without being seen. This theory expresses the desire for a subject to be intimately involved within the domestic scene while being in a position to control the space. There are moments in *Don's Party* that distinctly illustrate this theory. Throughout the play there are a number of instances where characters disappearing behind the dividing wall of the on stage and off stage space create tension. Early in the play Mal starts to tell a joke to Jody and Mack, the joke involves Mal pulling his pants down and he decides to move off to the 'privacy of the bedroom' to continue telling the joke. As they walk off to the bedroom - to a back stage space - Mack's wife Jenny and Jody's husband Simon call them back attend to certain tasks.²⁷ These actions illustrate ideas of control through the gaze. That as soon as there is potential for their partners to be no longer in the public view, or within the view of one another, there is a questioning of fidelity. The dividing wall between the on and off stage sections of the house acts as a tense boundary between intimacy and control.

This concept is also illustrated through the character Evan who does not leave the on stage space of the house with Kath unless accompanied by Don. Evan's sentiments about intimacy and control are intensified when his own wife is suddenly not visible within the public stage of the hosts' house. The domestic setting in *Don's Party* acts as a device to control and manipulate behaviour, to create tension between the couples at the party as they move between the spaces that are on and off stage. This clearly illustrates Colomina's point of the occupant being preceded by his or her setting; the house frames and controls their behaviour. It creates this drama at the threshold between the highly visible spaces of the kitchen and living areas and the unknown of the hidden bedrooms.

Conclusion

Post war Australia shifted the interiority of its domesticity into the spotlight through various creative mediums including magazines and television, but especially in the theatre. As such there is a defined history between Australian drama and domesticity emerging in the 1950s. With this focus on domesticity and the shift from traditional colonial housing to modern houses influenced by European and American architecture, a new literary landscape for playwrights had been created. This is especially evident in *Don's Party* where the setting represents two separated homogenous domestic interiors that frame, divide and intensify a multiplicity of complex relationships between characters. Without the specific architectural devices of the dividing wall, the tension between the characters in David Williamson's *Don's Party* would not have been reached. In the 1976 film version of *Don's Party*, allowing the camera to follow characters into the bedrooms lost the tension built

throughout the story. The experience we get in the theatre is somehow more authentic of being a guest in Don and Kath's house. Not only was domesticity tied to an Australian identity through a broader cultural phenomenon, but also through the constructs of both an outer and inner interiority of the Australian home. This opening up of Australian domesticity manifested physically in the architecture of Melbourne's suburban mass-produced housing with the emergence of the stage for the family to perform on created by the open plan home. Williamson's detailed refraction of the AV Jennings house is testament to how this new typology in Melbourne housing framed a controlled interior defined by a dividing wall between two separated domestic interiorities.

NOTES

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