

TANGENT YERE

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## Black out in Alice

A history of the  
establishment and  
development of  
town camps in  
Alice Springs

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### Summary

This monograph examines the initial stage of the Alice Springs Aboriginal town camp development programs funded by the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs. It sets the program in the context of the progressive marginalization and alienation of Aboriginal town campers in Alice Springs since the first white settlers arrived there in the late nineteenth century. The monograph, as far as is possible, describes the view of the Aboriginal camp problem formed by white administrators responsible for the camps. It also briefly discusses complex issues like race relations in Alice Springs to show the urban context in which the town campers dwell.

In 1975, the now defunct Aboriginal Housing Panel started to work in Alice Springs. The latter part of this monograph is devoted to describing its work and the way in which the Tangatjira Council, an Aboriginal town campers' association, was established and grew to play the major role in the affairs of the town campers. The final chapter examines the prospects of this council now that it has been deprived of assistance from independent professional bodies like the Housing Panel and is absolutely dependent on and accountable to government instrumentalities for the form and content of its continued existence.



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M. Heppell



### Introduction

Alice Springs is one of Australia's most famous towns, celebrated in fiction and film, and now a major attraction of the Australian tourist industry. Resident in Alice Springs is a significant population of Aborigines, many of whom until recently were excluded from Alice Springs society and were the objects of scorn, derision and harassment on the part of officials and common citizens alike. Such actions still occur and Alice Springs, from time to time, receives unwelcome publicity as the racist clamours of some of its citizenry receive the full glare of attention from the nation's news media.

The Aborigines are Alice Spring's oldest citizens and, unlike the great majority of whites, remain in and around Alice for the whole of their lives. Until very recently, a large proportion of this population found its shelter and eked out an existence as illegal squatters on vacant crown land. They had no other homes. Most had no work. They were regarded by the white community as unwanted vagrants. They drank a lot and seemed locked in a vicious cycle of poverty, neglect and helplessness, the only release from which was the oblivion of intoxication. The town campers, or fringe dwellers as these people were called, were regarded as a problem for the township and much time was spent in devising schemes to rid Alice Springs of them. None were successful and the town campers still remain. Many, however, are now living in modern brick houses and there is a new spirit abroad in the camps which is hangover free and which has galvanized the town campers into transforming their environment and improving their economic and social prospects beyond measure.

One of the purposes of this monograph is to supply information about a successful Aboriginal development scheme and, in a modest way, to make a contribution to the hitherto neglected study of development programs in traditionally-oriented Aboriginal communities. In part, it is directed



at government and its administrative arm, the bureaucracy, to try to establish that the well springs of successful development programs are the people for whom they are designed and that, until the people can envisage a realization of these ends and consider them worth striving for, they are not likely to become motivated to take advantage of the opportunities and convert a program into a success. Only out of such a conversion are they likely to seek to acquire the requisite management skills to maintain such a program after the developmental support has been withdrawn.

In part, the monograph is aimed at architects and students of architecture to try to demonstrate that architecture, if it is to be a community tool, should be much more than simply the design of buildings. If architecture is to achieve substantial successes among communities with different values and social organizations from that of the architect, it must be based on an understanding of a particular community greatly in excess of that hitherto achieved by members of the profession.

This monograph should also be a contribution to the broader field of development studies, for it seeks to examine various aspects of the process of marginalization which has led to the town camp Aborigines occupying the place they do in the society of Alice Springs. As Gerry (1978) has argued, it is through an understanding of the mechanisms by which exploitation has taken place that successful means to initiate constructive change can take place.

For decades, Aborigines in Alice Springs were little more than creatures of the authorities, being pushed here and there to suit the whims of some particular administrator or petty official. Little has been written about the relationship between the bureaucracy and Aborigines in the Northern Territory (nor, for that matter, in the whole of Australia). Tatz wrote a useful thesis (1965) which examined the policies and practices of the Welfare Branch of the Northern Territory Administration (NTA) in the early 1960s and Collmann (1979a and b) has included some useful information in two articles recently published. Where possible, this monograph seeks to present information to indicate the attitudes of public servants about Aborigines and the Aboriginal 'problem' in Alice Springs and to give some idea of the quality of the relationship which has developed over the years between Aborigines and public servants.



One effect of Aborigines being deprived of their land and many of their cultural roots and of being pushed hither and thither with no say over what happened is that the great majority developed what appeared to be a passive dependency on government to meet all their wants. Many others, however, nourished a burning anger, only barely suppressed, at the many indignities heaped upon them by the newly arrived white visitors, an anger which occasionally erupted to the surface in drunken brawls and other acts of violence on person and property and usually committed on other Aborigines. The monograph examines, briefly, in a historical context, government policies and their repercussions in the treatment of Aborigines in Alice Springs, and sheds some light on the apparent unwillingness of Aborigines to do anything to help themselves.

In particular, the monograph considers the course of a development program to house all Aborigines living in town camps in Alice Springs. The program was begun by the Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Housing Panel. Its very success seemed to militate against the Panel which, in August 1978, was disbanded by the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs for reasons which have never been made public (at least those which were so laughable that one assumes that there must have been other more important ones). One possibility is that the Panel's concern with the broader issues of development went beyond its terms of reference, a factor which became a constant bone of contention between the Panel, the Minister and the head office of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA) in Canberra. The monograph describes the approach of the Panel to the development program and the reader can judge for himself the efficacy of this approach. It also describes the bases on which the house designs were prepared and how they were based on observations of the social organization of the Aborigines living in the town camps and in particular at Mt Nancy town camp. The final part of the design process initiated by the Panel, an independent evaluation of the project, was never completed owing to the governments' parsimony. It is hoped that this task will be undertaken by some scholar or official in order to establish whether or not the assumptions on which the Panel's work were based were well founded. A casual visitor, however, to Mt Nancy, the town camp in which the first houses were built, would not fail to be impressed at the appearance of the camp and the obvious way it was being enjoyed, with, in 1979, foals and bullocks grazing in yards, chickens roaming over the open spaces, well kept yards and houses little different



in appearance from the day they were handed over some two years before.

For the DAA in Canberra, the provision of housing for Aborigines is a design and delivery problem. The Panel, in the DAA's view, was supposed to evaluate and prepare house designs. Other building and endeavours were, for the DAA, beyond its purview. This monograph seeks to demonstrate how myopic is such a narrow definition of housing as a development tool. These comments should be seen in the context of the fact that, as I have argued elsewhere (Heppell 1979), housing became, after 1972, a focus of the Commonwealth government's development programs for remote Aborigines and usually accounted for between 30 and 40 per cent of the total annual budget of the DAA. Development, if it is to be successful (and the DAA's housing programs have, in the majority of cases, been far from successful), is more than simply placing a house on the ground and handing it over to its grateful (if somewhat bemused) new Aboriginal owners. As this monograph argues, it requires a keen interest on the part of the recipients which in turn leads to housing being incorporated into their value system. Once that has been accomplished the grounds for a successful housing program have been laid. It also requires an ability to manage the new demands created by this unfamiliar mode of living, and these management skills have to be acquired by learning and experience. For Aborigines, any housing development also has to provide an environment in which their social institutions can continue to operate.

In Alice Springs, housing developments also have to take into account the social organization of each Aboriginal group, which extends far beyond the group of kin residing in any camp to others living in remote settlements and cattle stations whose aspirations are often quite different from their urban cousins. Accommodation, if the camps are to fulfil all their functions, must be provided for remote kin if they, as visitors to Alice Springs, are not to be cut off from their normal hosts and important elements in any tribal network.

This monograph also examines in some detail the process of development which took place in the Alice Springs town camps. In 1975, when the Panel began its work in Alice Springs, the town was no jewel in the DAA firmament. The permanent head of the department had described Alice as one of the most difficult situations the Department had to deal



with.<sup>1</sup> This difficulty was partly attributable to the attitudes of the Aborigines. For a development program to be successful, the hitherto passive dependency of town campers on government had to change. Their lifestyle of degradation relieved by bouts of drunkenness was hardly the basis for a program which in 1977 was estimated to cost about \$8.5 million, nor for coping with the complex demands of living in houses with conventional facilities. Had the Panel simply designed houses, as other architects had done before them, the development program would have failed (if it ever got off the ground) and, with the way the bureaucracy works, it is probable that the town campers would have been blamed and been deprived for a number of years of a reasonable opportunity to enjoy some of the privileges and comforts which they had long desired.

To some extent fortune favoured the Panel, for it started its work in Alice Springs at the time when a burning issue - the acquisition through land rights of some kind of security of tenure to the land on which town campers dwelled - arose and consumed the attention of the town campers. It served to unite all the town campers with a common purpose. From the joint political action which they took to acquire town leaseholds, the town campers began to look critically at conditions in their camps and to devise means to alleviate them. It was this process of a growing and motivating interest in improving their conditions which, more than anything else, laid the groundwork for the successful program that the Alice Springs town camp developments have become.

Finally, I hope the monograph will be of some use to Aborigines in other parts of Australia. In essence, it is a tribute to the resilience of the town campers and to the perspicacity of their leaders in seizing their opportunity so well after years of oppression and in charting such a successful course.

<sup>1</sup> Minutes of meeting between B.G. Dexter and Senator J.L. Cavanagh, 18 April 1974.



## Chapter 1

### The Alice

The town of Alice Springs (Fig.1) is located at the very centre of the Australian continent. With a population of 15,000 (according to 1976 census figures), it is the only town of any significant size in the vast area of central Australia. It is located in an arid region which is hot and dry for most of the year. At times it can be extremely windy with willy-willies (small tornadoes) a not uncommon feature. It can also be very cold, night temperatures often falling below zero during the winter. In the summer, heavy rains can leave the normally dry creeks and river beds flowing, sometimes to such an extent that they flood the surrounding countryside.

First established as a telegraph station in 1872, Alice Springs languished as a tiny European settlement for many years. In 1899, the population of the station and adjoining town (then called Stuart) totalled around thirty (Blackwell and Lockwood 1965). The town has from its earliest days served as a centre for miners and pastoralists in the surrounding areas, offering supplies and services. The extent of these services was markedly increased by the extension of the railway line to Alice Springs in 1929.

Besides easing the transportation of supplies from the south, the development of the railway radically altered the movement of cattle to southern markets. One result of these changes was a surge in the population and by 1932 there were around 200 whites in Alice Springs. Population growth then continued slowly until World War II, when the Allied Military Forces established a base at Alice Springs, which gave another boost to the population. In 1947 it had risen to 1,871.

The Pine Gap Space Research Facility, located 19km southwest of Alice Springs, was a major factor in the increase in population during the 1960s. According to Hanson and Todd (1974).



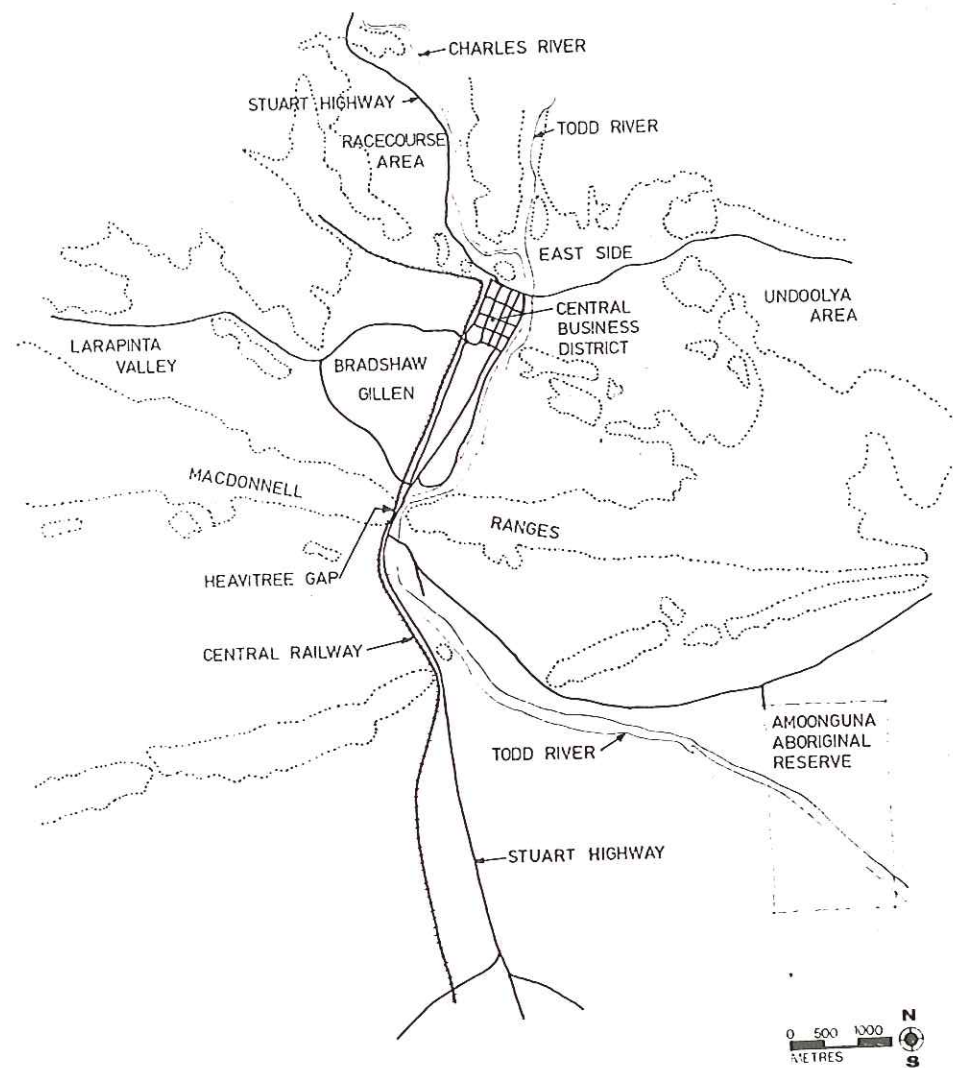


Fig.1 Alice Springs and its environs



the establishment of this facility gave the Alice Springs economy a considerable boost, with the town achieving a growth rate of 11% compound since 1966. Over 200 houses were built in the town for civilian personnel attached to the facility and, although the labour force levelled off to operational use, its continued operation will maintain demands for local goods and supporting services.

A further stimulus to population growth was the location of a number of federal government offices in Alice Springs to service the central desert area. The growth of Alice Springs as a government service centre was most marked after Cyclone Tracy hit Darwin in 1974.

The greatest stimulus to population growth in Alice Springs (see Table 1), however, has been tourism. Since the early 1960s, great emphasis has been placed upon the development of the town as a tourist centre. Each year, thousands of tourists from all over Australia and overseas come into Alice by air, road and rail. It is a base from which they make visits to the many spectacular scenic areas in the region such as Ayers Rock, the Olgas, Standley Chasm and numerous gorges, hills and other features. In 1977-78, 135,372 tourists visited the Centre, almost all of whom also visited Alice Springs, and this figure was projected to rise to 157,160 during 1979-80.

Table 1  
Population of Alice Springs, 1961-79

Year	Official total	Europeans	Aborigines
1961	4,648	3,914	589
1966	6,037	4,815	875
1971	11,179	6,045	1,369
1976	14,149	9,660	1,575
1979	16,025		

Sources: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Northern Territory Statistical Summaries 1961-77; Census of Population, 4 July 1979.

Note: Figures do not add to total, as all respondents did not state race.



The experience of the Aboriginal residents of Alice Springs diverges so greatly from that of the Europeans that, to understand and assess their current circumstances and expectations, a separate account of their history and of their relations with white settlers is required.

Alice Springs and its environs have undoubtedly been inhabited by Aboriginal people for thousands of years. Certainly there were Aborigines in the region when the first Europeans arrived, but their hunting and gathering mode of adaptation precluded any permanent settlement in the desert. We can be certain, however, that any place with permanent water such as Alice Springs would have been an important camping area and would have been used regularly by nomadic bands in whose territory it lay. Not only would food and water have been available there, but regular visits would have been made to the many sacred sites in the area, such as Heavitree Gap, for ceremonial purposes (e.g. see Spencer and Gillen 1938).

European contact with Aborigines in the Centre came much later than in areas to the south. Various expeditions in the 1860s and 1870s came across groups of Aborigines, but these meetings were generally fleeting (Hartwig 1965). The first cattle reached Alice Springs in 1872. From that date, an increasing number of Europeans came into the region to establish pastoral stations. With most of the land in more desirable areas of Australia already alienated, the Central Desert was seen as a last source of land which would not also require a large capital outlay. Once permanent white settlers moved into the area, increased contact with the original inhabitants was inevitable. The consequences of that contact were monumental and devastating for the Aborigines, and the effects of it are still felt.

Although the Aboriginal reaction to whites was often one of fear, avoidance or restrained curiosity, sometimes their displeasure over the encroachment of whites on their territory, the takeover of water holes and, presumably, the desecration of sacred sites, was expressed by attacks on whites. In the Northern Territory in 1874, for example, the Barrow Creek Telegraph Station (the one nearest north of Alice Springs) was attacked by local Aborigines. Such Aboriginal resistance and the killing by them of stock were met with harsh punitive measures on the part of the whites, a pattern which continued well into this century. In the face of superior weapons and indiscriminate slaughter by whites, Aborigines were not only



pushed off the land desired by the settlers, but their attempts to retaliate diminished rapidly. The last slaughter of Centralian Aborigines occurred in 1928 and came to be known as the Coniston Massacre, when an estimated thirty-one Aborigines were gunned down by Constable Murray and a party of eight. In this context, it must be understood that the whites in Alice Springs were very much a minority in a hostile land and before the Coniston Massacre which followed the killing by Warlpiri of a European station owner, there were considerable fears that the whole white population might be massacred by local Aborigines. At the time there were rumours of Aborigines massing to attack.

The introduction of cattle into the arid Central Desert region meant the inevitable demise of the nomadic hunter gatherer adaptation of the Aborigines. All major water sources were quickly taken over by the pastoralists who located their homesteads by the best permanent ones. This meant the loss of water not only for humans but for the game animals on which they partly relied for food. For example, Finlayson (quoted in Frith 1977) established that, before the 1930s, the Central Australian region supported one monotreme, 29 species of marsupial and 8 species of rodent. By 1970 14 species including most of the bandicoots and small wallabies were extinct. Around Alice Springs, there were 10 surviving species of bandicoot, wallaby and kangaroo in 1932. By the 1960s only 4 remained (Newsome 1971).

The effect of cattle on native flora was probably even more serious. Chippendale (1963) has shown that, one year after cattle were introduced to a virgin range in Central Australia, the abundance and diversity of vegetation fell by two-thirds. Even then the vegetation was ten times that of country which had been grazed for many years. As vegetable foods probably accounted for well in excess of 50 per cent of the Central Australian Aboriginal diet, it is difficult to exaggerate the detrimental impact of cattle on Aboriginal food resources.

It was not long after the cattle industry was established in Central Australia that most of the Aborigines living there had to depend on the handout of rations by the Europeans in order to survive. Employers usually paid Aboriginal workers not in cash but in rations or clothing for them and their dependants. In addition, government subsidized rations were handed out on stations, missions and, later on, on settlements as they were established. The rations became for many



Aborigines their only dependable source of food and this must have had some appeal. But the rations were hardly nutritionally sound and must have been boring as well. They usually consisted of flour, tea, sugar and sometimes meat, jam and other items. In one year (1914) the supply of flour for Aborigines in Alice Springs was finished by the end of the month after the one in which it had been supplied (Commonwealth of Australia 1915). The Aborigines supplemented their rations with game and wild foods, when available, but their traditional subsistence had been essentially and irretrievably altered.<sup>1</sup>

Devastating effects on Aborigines also ensued from the policies devised by government and white settlers over the years. The extremely complicated nature of those policies and their development and change over many years cannot be presented here. Rowley (1970, 1971) has considered them and explained them at length. Suffice it to say that these policies served to place and keep Aborigines in an abject position, made it easy to exploit them as cheap sources of labour and for sexual favours, and excluded them from many of the rights and privileges of Australian citizens.

Once white hegemony had been established, Aborigines legally became 'wards'.<sup>2</sup> They were placed under the control of official protectors and, among other things, could not vote, own land or other property, legally consume alcohol, were paid well below the rate for white workers (and the payment was often made in kind rather than in cash), had no freedom of movement and, in many respects, were unable to make decisions which affected their own lives. In short, most of the fundamental rights of Australian citizenship were denied the Aboriginal population.

It was not long after the arrival of whites that a sedentary Aboriginal population became settled in Alice Springs. It is difficult to ascertain the size of the population in the early years, as no records appear to have been kept. Doris Blackwell, in her book *Alice on the Line* (Blackwell and Lockwood 1965), states that when she arrived in the town with her parents in 1899 she saw about 150

<sup>1</sup>It is impossible to document this history adequately here. For detailed accounts, see Hartwig (1965), Rowley (1970, 1971) and Stone (1974).

<sup>2</sup>The term 'wards' was not officially recognized in the Northern Territory until the 1953 Wards Employment Ordinance.



Aborigines camping along the Todd River. At that time, they greatly outnumbered the 30 white residents. And in 1914, the Northern Territory Administrator noted 'there are 120 to 140 Aborigines permanently camped at Alice Springs'.<sup>3</sup> In the late 1920s, a number of Aranda camped permanently in and around Alice Springs. Plowman, for example, in his account of a journey through the centre of Australia, wrote:

There was no need to call Dick next morning. Less than a day's journey ahead was the very small, but hill-encircled township that to the dark-skinned lad spelt home. In those hills his ancestors had lived and roamed from time immemorial. There every blackboy spoke Dick's mother-tongue (the Arunta dialect), and there he would find plenty of mates (Plowman 1934).

There was employment for Aborigines. Some worked at the Telegraph Station and later more were employed on railroad and road building. Still later, during World War II, the Army employed many Aborigines as labourers.

Over the years the town of Alice Springs became an important centre for Aborigines from the outlying areas just as it was for whites. A long-standing pattern has developed of station employees and others coming into the town to visit relatives, seek recreation, purchase goods, obtain medical care and other services, or find employment and then often remain permanently. These visitors now swell the local core population of Aborigines resident in the town by many hundreds, especially during the off-season on pastoral properties. Most of the Aboriginal visitors stay in what are known as 'town camps' with relatives and friends.

The Aboriginal population of Alice Springs is by no means an undifferentiated or homogeneous one. Indeed, there are significant distinctions between various groupings which have developed out of the conditions and policies to which Aborigines have been subjected. Before proceeding further, these distinctions and their causes and consequences should be noted so that the Aboriginal groups which are the focus of this monograph can be identified clearly.

With the growth and expansion of pastoralism in the Centre, there was a rapid increase of whites into the area

<sup>3</sup>Commonwealth Archives: C.R.S. A3, NT 5471.



and, as in most pioneering communities, they were predominantly men. At the same time, Aborigines were perforce becoming more sedentary as they became more dependent on ration handouts for survival, many of which were related to work on a station. Despite official and popular opposition, illicit sexual liaisons between white men and Aboriginal women, both forced and unforced, were common and there was a concomitant growth of a part-Aboriginal population. The formulation of policies for the supervision of Aborigines was affected by this phenomenon. It was commonly assumed by whites that persons of mixed race would be more amenable to the adoption of European ways, and the more 'white blood' an individual had, the more successfully he or she could be educated (Rowley 1970:205-7). Thus, part-Aborigines were the first targets of government policies. Although there was official disapproval of the propagation of 'half-castes' and desultory attempts were made to limit it, it was realized that the process was inevitable. Official energies were, therefore, directed to separating the mixed blood population from the full bloods, discouraging marriage between mixed and full bloods and training the mixed bloods to work and eventually take their places in white society.

Separation of mixed blood child from full blood mother was usually achieved through force. A practice was developed of taking mixed blood children away from their Aboriginal mothers and placing them in institutions in Adelaide and elsewhere. Some of these children were adopted by or fostered out to white families. Many were never heard of or seen again by their parents. Many Aborigines in Alice Springs have vivid personal recollections of this kind of separation. Some children were slightly more fortunate and were not sent away from Alice Springs but were placed in institutions there, such as the Bungalow, which will be described later.

By the 1950s, the Welfare Branch of the NTA had become responsible for administering Aboriginal policy throughout the Territory. Collmann (1979a) has described the impossible situation in which many Aboriginal families were placed by Welfare Branch policy and the application of white economic and domestic values to the assimilation of Aborigines. According to Collmann, the principal economic virtue of a male was to obtain paid employment while that of the female was to display domestic virtues in bringing up a family properly. For Aborigines in Alice Springs, however, there was a dilemma. There was virtually no work for males there. The available work was on pastoral stations, usually a great



distance from the township. If a wife accompanied her husband to a station, the Welfare Branch deemed that the couple would not be able to care for their children properly and therefore confiscated the children and committed them to an institution.

Collmann (1979a:394) describes the situation of a Mt Nancy couple, Terry and Isabel Sharp. The husband was an excellent stockman and his wife always accompanied him when he was away. The result was, as Mrs Thatcher, the welfare officer in charge of the Sharps, told Collmann:

Terry and Isabel agreed to surrender their children only after the Welfare Branch threatened to take legal action against them. It warned them they had to place the children in institutions so they could attend school or face committal proceedings in the Alice Springs Children's Court. The Sharps decided to give up their children 'voluntarily'.

In such cases, it is hardly surprising that Aboriginal resentment of white interference in their lives grew.

Collmann also describes (1979a:390) how the Welfare Branch supported women who were prepared to maintain an approved household in which commitment was made to children rather than to a stable relationship with a man. Women, unlike men, could obtain domestic employment in Alice Springs and the Welfare Branch actually assisted them to find jobs and obtain babysitters. After 1961, single women became eligible for child endowment and supporting mothers' pensions which were paid in cash. The Branch and Housing Commission offered rebates to pensioners, which allowed single women to live in town even though their incomes were low. Indeed, according to Collmann, 'the welfare officers often encouraged women, depending on the men with whom they associated, to apply for pensions, live without men, and independently support their families'.

As a result of these and other historical facts, there is today a distinct mixed blood population in Alice Springs. The majority of these people are more or less integrated into the wider society but still proudly identify as Aborigines. They have been educated in European schools, share many European values, speak English as their principal tongue, hold a variety of jobs in Alice Springs and live in conventional European houses.



Many mixed bloods, however, have firmly rejected a suburban, European way of life, preferring Aboriginal values and modes of behaviour which they follow in discrete social groups to which they belong. These groups also include 'full bloods' who, with few exceptions, have maintained a cultural identity close to their traditional roots and separate from European/Australian culture. All the members of these groups understand an Aboriginal language, have varying proficiency in English, have had little or no schooling in the European educational system and hold largely to Aboriginal values (which is not to suggest that the Aborigines living in Alice Springs suburban houses do not). Therefore, there exists in Alice Springs a distinct socio-cultural group which is known as the 'town campers' or 'fringe dwellers' and these people are the subject of this monograph.

The term 'fringe dwellers' is commonly used to refer to certain groups of urban Aborigines and, although definitions of this term are imprecise, it implies both social and residential position.<sup>4</sup> One official view of fringe dwellers appears in a submission made in April 1972 by E.E. Payne and H.M. Ford to the Senate Standing Committee on Social Environment:<sup>5</sup>

Fringe communities are those which live in crude self-made shelters on the outskirts of towns. They usually consist of itinerant Aborigines visiting town for a holiday or for medical attention, although some residents are relatively permanent. What employment they have is casual and poorly paid. Most of the camps are not officially sanctioned and have, therefore, no water or other services, with the result that unhygienic practices grow up and the camps present a generally depressing picture.

While much of this statement is factual, two points require comment. First, the notion that most people in the

<sup>4</sup>It should be noted that many of the Alice Springs camps are not literally on the fringes of the town. Some have been virtually surrounded by suburbs as the town has expanded.

<sup>5</sup>Commonwealth of Australia (1971-76:152). Payne and Ford were, respectively, First Assistant Secretary, N.T. Government Social Affairs Division, Department of the Interior, and Director, Administrative Services, Welfare Division, NTA.



fringe camps are itinerant is inaccurate, though commonly held. Because there are no reliable statistics available, it is difficult to state firmly how many residents there are in each camp and, anyway, the numbers vary with the number of visitors a camp accommodates at any time. It is certainly true, however, that, although many Aborigines from outlying areas visit Alice Springs and stay in the town camps, there is a core population of permanent residents numbering several hundreds (see Table 2). Many of these have lived in Alice Springs all their lives. Many of the older people in the camps have watched the town grow and found themselves inexorably pushed from camp site to camp site, each time further away from the centre. Moreover, there have been many occasions when camps have been dismantled by the authorities and their members forcibly evicted. These movements might have given the camps an air of impermanence, but it needs emphasizing that the core populations of town camps do not consist of itinerants; only, until very recently, of landless and dispossessed people.

The second point concerns the fact that, until the recent grant of leases to some of the camps, most were not officially sanctioned and therefore had no services. It is therefore hardly surprising that 'unhygienic practices' grew up. The NTA's submission is a telling statement in which official policy mirrors popular views. Despite the fact that some of the camps have been in existence for over thirty years, such essential services for urban living as reticulated water (or *any* water) and electricity have not been extended to them.<sup>6</sup> Instead, the camps have been ignored or neglected on the assumption or hope that they will disappear. Payne and Ford well demonstrate the covert policy of official neglect. While acknowledging that in the camps 'some residents are relatively permanent', they conclude:

Permanent life in fringe camps is no basis for acceptance within the wider community and is a negative factor in the education of children, the employment of their parents, the general health of the total group and may represent a threat to the health of the wider community. The principles covering the provision of facilities at these camps, therefore, are that, while it is necessary

<sup>6</sup>This situation has changed since 1977 and the changes will be considered fully later in this monograph.



Table 2  
Estimated core population of town camps

Aboriginal name	European name	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979
Ilibilili Tjatja	Dalgety's Paddock				60	56	20
Purarultna	Dick Palmer's	10	20	26	12	20	8
	Bazzo's Farm				40		
	Mt Nancy	70	50	69	50	75	100
Ntaka Ulpaya	Charles River	95	82	55	120	188	101
Ootnarungatcha	Trucking Yards	50	40	52	60	109	134
Knudnara	Morris Soak	30	30	21	20	84	168
Ilpea-Ilpea	Sadadeen			36	40	131	97
Yarintja	Heavitree Gap				130	55	12
Ntapa	Little Sisters	80	80	99	60	69	50
Injlunga	Old Timers	30	30	34	25	37	74
Paranja		40	45	27	15	62	24
Yirara	Artist's Camp	10	30	17	30		
	Others <sup>a</sup>	160	135	34			
Total		575	542	470	662	886	788

<sup>a</sup> The number of camps making up these populations were 9, 10 and 2 respectively.

Sources: 1974 - DAA (1974:30 Sept.). 1975 - DAA (1975:29 Apr.). In both DAA surveys, population ranges were sometimes given. In all such cases, the lower figure has been taken. 1976 - Cutter (1976). 1977 - Wigley (1977). 1978 - Tangatjira Council (1978). 1979 - N.T. Department of Health (1979).



to ensure adequate health and hygiene services and basic shelter, this should not represent an encouragement to permanent residence, since those using the camps have access to permanent accommodation at a settlement or mission where employment, health, education, accommodation and welfare services are available to assist them to improve the total range of their living conditions. If they wish to remain in contact with the town, similar services are available at the town settlements from which they may commute to employment etc.; alternatively, although few seem to want to do this, they may obtain housing commission accommodation within the general community (Commonwealth of Australia 1971-76:153).

The policy of official neglect is well exemplified by the apparent fear of the Commonwealth and the NTA that something done to improve the conditions in a town camp might become an encouragement to permanent residence. Payne and Ford's idea that alternative permanent accommodation existed at settlements or missions is risible. Included with the submission from which the above extract is taken was a survey which indicated that, at January 1971, there were 396 housing units available on settlements and 1571 families requiring permanent accommodation; and, on missions, 540 units available and 1687 families requiring accommodation. What kind of permanent accommodation Payne and Ford had in mind and how it would differ from the cleared pieces of bare earth available in town camps in Alice Springs is difficult to imagine. Quite apart from this, the implication that the Alice Springs fringe campers ought to live on settlements implies that they are unable to choose for themselves where they want to live - a view which harks back to their pre-1967 status. Not only that, those who wished to live in town apparently had no other alternative but to live in Housing Commission accommodation and be governed by a set of rules which paid scant attention to Aboriginal residential obligations. Alternatively they could move to one of the 'town settlements' and there 'remain in contact with the town'. Alice Springs had only one town settlement: Amoonguna, which is some 14 kilometres from the centre of Alice Springs and a long walk for the average Aboriginal family wishing to remain in contact with the town. There was no bus service between Amoonguna and Alice Springs, and those Aborigines without work could hardly afford a car. Those without a car could not get into Alice Springs to find work. Ford and Payne



neglected to say, however, how an Aboriginal town camper, even if he wanted to have the Housing Commission as a landlord, would overcome the prejudice and tenancy qualifications of the Commission and have his application granted. The principal tenancy qualification of the Housing Commission was that an Aboriginal applicant already display all the domestic virtues of a house-proud European housewife, a requirement which, when a family was living on a bare piece of earth in a dwelling built of materials salvaged from a local garbage dump, was difficult to meet.

The above discussion has brought us nearer to the official definition of a 'fringe dweller', at least as it was in 1971. The expression refers clearly to those Aborigines who have taken up residence in town but who, in the official view, have no right to be living there in the way they do. In fact, not only have they no right to be there, but, by remaining there, they represent a potential threat to the wider community (rationalized as a threat to the health of the community). Their presence, therefore, is met with hostility on the part of white residents, and rightly so, in the official view, because of the undefined evils they bring with them. In the white view, then, 'fringe dweller' is an ascribed social status describing those Aborigines who do not conform to European standards of behaviour, who should be resident in an appropriate establishment set up for them where proper behaviour can be learnt, but who have rejected this 'better way' and hang on, living in small groups where they can and eking out an existence on the fringes of society.

The expression 'fringe dweller' is a European one and one of opprobrium. For the Aborigines, the expression has little currency. The people who are the focus of this monograph are known as the 'town campers' and though this expression might be regarded as synonymous with 'fringe dwellers' by many Europeans, it refers to groups of people about which there are only positive aspects. Town campers are people who have largely rejected the European suburban way of life, desire to live in small closely knit homogeneous groups which exalt certain human values above those held and expected by white society (such as kinship obligations) and, above all, want to pursue their chosen lifestyle away from any possible interference by outsiders who little understand the values and aspirations of the town campers.



### The Bungalow

It was not long after Europeans had established a settlement in Alice Springs that an institution known as the Bungalow was established for those Aboriginal people who wanted to live in the town.<sup>7</sup> The Bungalow was established in 1915, when an Aboriginal woman, Topsy Smith, from the mining town of Arltunga, moved into Alice Springs (then called Stuart) with her seven mixed blood children. She was allowed to camp near the Police Station and soon arrangements were made to provide accommodation there for mixed bloods (mostly children). First, one corrugated iron shed was built and later a further two were added. The local school teacher, Mrs Standley, was appointed matron of the Bungalow. She continued to teach white children in the morning and Aboriginal children in the afternoons. She also supervised the running of the Bungalow. By 1923 there were sixty children there.

The Bungalow, almost from the outset, was not without its critics. Spencer (1923) considered it to be inadequate. He recommended that it be closed and that a more substantial training institution be set up expressly for part-Aboriginal children. In 1928, J.W. Bleakley (who was Chief Protector of Aborigines in Queensland), as part of his inquiry into the situation of Aborigines in the Northern Territory, deplored the conditions at the Bungalow and recommended that it be closed and that 'half-caste children of 50% or more Aboriginal blood' be sent to Hermannsburg Mission and the remainder to 'European institutions where they can be given a reasonable chance of absorption into the white community to which they rightly belong' (quoted in Stone 1974).

The Bungalow did not close. In 1932, the Stuart Telegraph Station (about 7 km from the centre of the township) did and the Post Office and staff were moved into town, which became known as Alice Springs. The Station buildings were taken over by the Welfare Department and the Bungalow name and population were transferred there. The move, though not apparently related to white demands that Aborigines not reside within the precincts of the township, resulted in the permanent Aboriginal population of Alice Springs being removed from the town.

<sup>7</sup>Notes on the Bungalow's early history were made by W.B. Spencer in a report to the Commonwealth (Spencer 1923).



The buildings at the station were more substantial than those in town and were used as a school, dormitory, clinic, offices and staff quarters. Not all, however, were or remained in good condition. In 1939, for example, a Member of Parliament deplored the conditions in which the 120 children and 14 adults at the Bungalow were living (Stone 1974:181).

In 1942, the Bungalow ceased to operate as an educational establishment. After the bombing of Darwin, all the residents were evacuated to Balaclava in South Australia and the Bungalow was closed. The army transformed the buildings into one of five labour camps for Aborigines which were located between Alice Springs and Darwin. It was reopened as a reserve in 1945, but for full-blood Aborigines, the part-Aboriginal children having been placed in St Mary's school in town. The purpose of the Bungalow Reserve was clear, as exemplified by an instruction from the Director of Native Affairs to his acting District Superintendent in Alice Springs:<sup>8</sup>

The practice of relatives who accompany patients to hospital residing on the block is to cease. The Bungalow Reserve has been created to provide for people visiting Alice Springs, and tribal objections notwithstanding, you must take firm steps to see that only those natives authorised to be within the prohibited area of Alice Springs reside there.

By 1960, the population of the Bungalow Reserve had grown to 386, and once again it became the butt of criticism by Europeans and European organizations in the town.

The case of the Bungalow illustrates some of the contradictions in the official approach to Aborigines in Alice Springs. Initially, the Bungalow was principally an educational establishment set up for children of Aboriginal and European unions. Not surprisingly, many Aboriginal parents did not want to be separated from their children resident in the Bungalow and, accordingly, camped nearby. The Bungalow, therefore, provided a compelling attraction to a number of Aborigines to set up a permanent camp close to the town of Stuart where they became accustomed to many of the facilities a town had to offer. No basic services, however, were provided for them.

<sup>8</sup>F.H.Moy, Director of Native Affairs to Acting District Superintendent, Native Affairs Branch, Alice Springs, 5 June 1952.



In many respects, the government's action over the Bungalow and inaction over the parents camped nearby mirrored parallel developments in the town. The government created a compelling reason for some Aborigines to take up residence near a facility or attraction they desired. Having provided the impetus to settlement, it did nothing to ameliorate or improve the conditions thereby created because, as far as the government was concerned, the Aborigines should not have been there in the first place. As more camps became established, so the government became more concerned about the undesirable features of these camps, the most persistent of which were that black faces and their associated living habits were not wanted around a white township.

#### Other Aboriginal camps

Not all Aborigines placed on the Bungalow Reserve wanted to be incarcerated there. According to Collmann (1979a), some preferred to live in the hills around Alice Springs, supporting themselves by traditional methods. As these 'desertions' were contrary to the provisions of the Welfare Ordinance of 1953 which made it illegal for these Aborigines to live outside the reserve without the Administration's permission, systematic searches were made for these deserters, and, when found, they were returned to the Bungalow.

While Aborigines fleeing the Bungalow Reserve were systematically sought and returned, others were being removed from the township of Alice Springs which, under section 11(2) of the Aboriginal Ordinance 1918-1947, was a prohibited area. They were sent back to their missions.

At the same time as the Bungalow was operating there was at least one Aboriginal camp in Alice Springs. Collmann (1979a) has described a camp situated by the Todd River adjacent to the old Telegraph Station. Apparently when the Telegraph Station was moved the people in this camp were taken to Hermannsburg. These people would have had strong associations with Alice Springs and many of them returned there from time to time. Others came in with relatives brought in to the hospital, the latter refusing to be admitted unless accompanied by kin.<sup>9</sup> To reside there, however, they required the written permission of a Protector and supplementary permits were required for temporary visits.

<sup>9</sup>W. McCoy, Acting District Superintendent to Director of Native Affairs, 30 May 1952.



The experience of the Finke River Mission block exemplifies the authority's response to Aborigines living in Alice Springs. The Finke River Mission (which also administered the Hermannsburg Mission) purchased a block of land which initially was on the outskirts of Alice Springs, some distance from any town buildings. The block came to be used by Aborigines and caused the authorities considerable concern. Numbers of Aborigines could often be found there. For example, on an inspection by the Native Affairs Branch on 21 September 1949, there were 51 Aborigines there ranging from individuals doing work in Alice Springs to 17 members of the Namatjira family apparently preparing to move to Haasts Bluff,<sup>10</sup> and, on 7 May 1952, there were 33 including a family, one of whose children later became the leader of the Ilparpa town camp.<sup>11</sup>

The Administration's concern about Aborigines camping within the town boundaries seemed to increase as the township expanded. For example, the Acting District Superintendent of the Native Affairs Branch wrote to the Superintendent of the Finke River Mission suggesting improvements to the block:<sup>12</sup>

I am of the opinion the time has now come, owing to the rapid expansion and development of Alice Springs township, for a review of conditions applicable to natives resident within the prohibited area of the town and that such conditions and facilities must be brought up to date to obviate unfavourable criticism.

In this direction Administration will build a camp adjacent to the Sanitary Depot for sanitary workers only complete with ablutions, conveniences and communal wash-houses.

It has been the practice in the past for Officers of this Branch and the Police to remove natives other than your Staff from your Mission block periodically as occasion demanded. This action has proved unsatisfactory as the natives drift

<sup>10</sup>L.N. Penhall, Patrol Officer to Acting District Superintendent, Native Affairs Branch, Alice Springs, 22 September 1949.

<sup>11</sup>B.D. Greenfield, Cadet Patrol Officer, Report - Finke River Mission Block, Alice Springs.

<sup>12</sup>W. McCoy, Acting District Superintendent, Native Affairs Branch to Superintendent, Finke River Mission, 19 September 1949.



back after a time and conditions remain unchanged. Complaints concerning the manner in which natives are camping within the town area at the Mission block have been made to the Alice Springs Progress Association to the effect unsanitary conditions etc., prevail in the area and in this regard, it must be realised this town is expanding and modernising rapidly and native administration must keep pace with it. Formerly your Mission block could be considered to be on the outskirts of the town whereas it now occupies a central position with which it must conform.

For Aborigines who should not be in Alice Springs, action could be swift.<sup>13</sup>

They [a list of 20 'boys'] were all warned to get a job and camp out at the Bungalow or get out of the town. As I had a list of their names, they would be removed by the Police if they were caught loafing around the town. Those who were camping outside the Gap, were told to shift out to the Bungalow, as if I caught them camping there I would give them a day to get out and then burn the wurlies.

The Finke River Mission echoed the concern of the authorities, perhaps more out of a fear that it might lose some of its flock at Hermannsburg if Aborigines from there were allowed to live in Alice Springs. For example, F.W. Albrecht wrote:<sup>14</sup>

after our people have kept away from town for some months past, they have tried again lately to establish themselves there by going in for a week or so. On a number of occasions it was said they wanted to see the Doctor. Then, after seeing the Doctor, they will continue there on their own and without a permit. All this is nothing but a new attempt to make the Mission Block their holiday resort.

<sup>13</sup>L.N. Penhall, Patrol Officer to Acting District Superintendent, Native Affairs Branch, Alice Springs, 23 February 1951.

<sup>14</sup>F.W. Albrecht to the District Superintendent, Native Affairs Branch, Alice Springs, 23 February 1951.



Since we cannot exercise any control of the place when absent here at Hermannsburg, and as we consider the whole contact detrimental and against their best interests, we thank you if again periodical inspections of the place would take place, and all those without a permit removed.

Certainly the Administration had the view that the Mission would not act because of a fear that their flock would reduce:<sup>15</sup>

Pastor Albrecht has been repeatedly advised to adopt a firm attitude to prevent persons camping on Mission property, but has in the past been loath to do so for fear of adversely affecting the attendance of his congregation.

#### The Little Flower Black Mission

When the Bungalow was transferred to the Old Telegraph Station buildings, a camp was started on what is now the Anzac Oval. Then some time after 1929 this camp shifted to a piece of land between the western boundary of the Bungalow Reserve and the eastern boundary of the Charles River (Collmann 1979a). According to Collmann, the shifts in this camp's location were a reflection of the restrictions on Aboriginal settlement in Alice Springs and the expansion of the town. Collmann wrote that this camp consisted predominantly of Aborigines from the vicinities of Alice Springs. It also became a meeting place for Aborigines from the north and south, serving as a kind of frontier post between the two groups. As an example of this frontier position, Aboriginal camel drovers on trains travelling north/south would change at the camp, southern drovers handing over to northern ones if the train was heading north, and vice versa.

According to Collmann, this camp came to be associated with the Roman Catholic church from the mid 1930s. O'Grady (1977:24) described how this started in 1935:

They drove to a camp four miles out of the town and found it deserted. Another two miles and they saw three adult blacks sitting in the dust and from them they learnt of a goat camp a little

<sup>15</sup>W. McCoy, Acting District Welfare Officer to Director of Welfare, 23 May 1957.



further on. Here they found six men, fifteen lubras and three boys ... Father Moloney went right to the point and told them that he and Frank [Brother Frank McGarry] were going to establish a mission for them. They thought the idea a good one, but Frank wondered if they understood.

This school was not without strong opposition from within the town. The Protector advised Father Moloney:

speaking officially I think you would be wise in considering the deep rooted feeling against the blacks. And though, as Protector, I gave you permission to start your black school, I think it would be wiser to go out to their camps and teach there (O'Grady 1977:25).

The school, known as the Little Flower Mission, started at the Presbytery in Alice Springs, but, by 1936, opposition to the presence of Aborigines in the town had become strong. For example, late in 1936, the Police Sergeant reported to the Administrator that the Catholic Mission wanted to turn Alice Springs into a semi-black town (O'Grady 1977:36). The school was therefore moved out of town, to a place along the Charles River, the first classes being held there in February 1937. Soon there were 113 Aborigines at the Mission (27 men, 26 women, 49 children of school age and 11 under). By August 1938, the numbers had risen to 140 (50 men, 40 women and 50 children) (O'Grady 1977:45, 59). By February 1941, numbers had risen to 221.

By 1940, official policy towards natives in and around Alice Springs was changing. According to O'Grady (1977:71), there were to be three permanent camps in the district: at Hermannsburg, Jay Creek and the Little Flower Mission. Jay Creek was set aside for non-working blacks, the aged and the infirm. Those who refused to live at Jay Creek would be sent bush, receiving a ration of flour, tea and sugar each Saturday, an issue of clothing twice a year and a blanket or two for the winter. In 1942, with Alice Springs becoming a major military centre, especially after the Japanese bombing of Darwin, word was received that the Mission must move out to the abandoned mining township of Arltunga (the township from which Topsy Smith and her family had moved to Alice Springs), some 90 km east of Alice Springs (O'Grady 1977:75). A mission reserve of 86 square miles (22,300 ha) was granted. This group was subsequently moved to Santa Teresa, about 90



km southeast of Alice Springs, when it was discovered that there was insufficient water at Arltunga for the population there.

Official responses to Aborigines visiting Alice Springs or attempting to reside there for any length of time were another factor likely to contribute to a growing resentment of white authority on the part of Aborigines. Many of the residents of Hermannsburg, Santa Teresa and Jay Creek were Aranda who had attempted to live at least semi-permanently in Alice Springs but had been removed. It is hardly surprising then, that many would try to return to the place in which they had tried to set up residence.

#### Amoonguna - a town settlement

The 'solution' to the problem of unwanted Aborigines littering the approaches to Alice Springs was for a settlement to be established a reasonable distance from the town. There, Aborigines could be settled and trained in the required European virtues before being permitted to take up an accepted place as full and respected citizens in the broader Australian polity. The place chosen was called Amoonguna; a reserve of two square miles (520 ha) was gazetted and the first Aborigines were moved there in June 1960.

Amoonguna was officially conceived as a self-contained village well away from the town where all Alice Springs Aborigines would live and where Aboriginal visitors from outlying areas would camp. This, it was thought, would solve the problem of unauthorized camps being set up in town. The plan was for the village to become self-contained, supporting itself by engaging in vegetable and fruit farming and keeping pigs. When Amoonguna was first occupied in June 1960, there were seven conventional houses (for European staff), quarters for unmarried staff, two dormitories, a school, hospital, kitchen and dining room, all of which were located in a discrete area of the settlement. Elsewhere, fifty-one unfurnished aluminium sheeted Kingstrand houses (costing £620 each) and three ablution blocks (one of which was for the school children and had hot water) were erected for Aborigines. Water and electricity were available in the settlement but were not reticulated to the Kingstrand houses.

The seeds of Amoonguna's failure were present from the outset. Physically, the amenities provided for Aborigines (and the basis for their first steps on the road to



assimilation) were not impressive. The Kingstrand houses have been described by Tatz (1965):

These units can best be described as mobile 'Meccano' sets, packed in crates, assembled on concrete slabs and held together by nuts and bolts ...

The writer's observation of them (after 18 months of usage) is that weathering, overcrowding (where they are used) and the mere leaning against walls give these units a lifetime of not more than four years. Kingstrand aluminium is meant to reflect heat. While the writer's experiments are not put forward as scientific evidence, his conclusion, on attempting to live in an unceilinged, uninsulated Kingstrand in Central Australia, is that they are uninhabitable. The concrete floor was hot at 11 p.m.; the measured temperature was 19°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 house.

The Kingstrand house belongs to the category 'transitional house'. The purpose of transitional houses was to provide Aborigines with appropriate, simple physical forms so that they could learn to live in a permanent dwelling. With experience, they would gradually progress from simple dwelling to one with some basic amenities like running water. Eventually, a family would progress to a conventional European house. As I have pointed out elsewhere (Heppell 1979), this approach is quite inappropriate as the 'transitional' house bears little resemblance to a typical European dwelling and therefore cannot provide the quality of experience desired by the designers of the program. Moreover, they are quite inadequate shelters in themselves, as Tatz has described. At Amoonguna, the inadequacy of the shelter was compounded by the insufficient number built. In 1960, the Aboriginal population at Amoonguna was 386. By building only 51 Kingstrand houses, the government was planning for an average occupancy rate of 7.6 people per house. With less than 100 square feet (9.3 sq.m) available in each house, it is hardly surprising that Tatz was able to record that overcrowding, after 18 months, had already taken its toll.

By 1965, the Amoonguna population had risen to 538, which correspondingly increased the strain on the 51 Kingstrand



houses available for Aborigines. This, then, was the 'town settlement' which, according to Payne and Ford, provided permanent accommodation for any Aboriginal who wanted to remain in contact with the town. In these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that the town camps they complained about continued to flourish.

A second disadvantage suffered by Amoonguna was its distance from Alice Springs. Located 14 km from the township, it was simply too far away for Aborigines to commute daily to 'employment etc.', as Payne and Ford envisaged. In 1960, very few, if any, Aborigines owned vehicles. There was no public transport, though a 'works bus' drove to Alice Springs in the morning and returned in the evening. To walk to town meant a 28 km round trip. For an Aboriginal, the settlement was barely in the locality of Alice Springs.

In reality, the settlement of Amoonguna, with its separate school and hospital, does not seem to have been planned as a satellite Aboriginal suburb of Alice Springs. It seems more to have been a manifestation of the government's ongoing policy of segregation as a preliminary stage in the assimilation process. That it has been unsuccessful cannot be denied. The Kingstrand houses built for the residents now lie abandoned. Although the lack of success has partly been due to the unsuitability of the buildings and the poor economic opportunities in the place, it is also partly due to the fact that, at Amoonguna, members of several linguistic groups (the Northern Territory Annual Report of 1963-64 listed Aranda, Anmatjira, Warlpiri, Luritja and Pitjantjatjara) were brought together and forced to live in an undifferentiated area in which it was impossible to maintain traditional boundaries. Tensions necessarily sprang from these living arrangements and the traditional enmities between and within these groups often spilled over into serious conflicts resulting in physical violence. Another reason for these tensions was that Amoonguna was in Aranda country. As the Assistant Director of the Welfare Branch in Alice Springs wrote:

There are Aborigines who are genuinely afraid to go to Amoonguna, partly because of the fighting and drinking, *but more because it is not their country, they are strangers there and they have relatives in Alice Springs with whom they prefer to camp and mix* (Lovegrove 1969).



The failure of Amoonguna has led to a decline in its population, which, since 1968, has been dramatic,<sup>16</sup> at a time when the total Aboriginal population was growing quite dramatically. Many Amoonguna residents returned to camp in Alice Springs itself, and thus created renewed pressure on the town camps which had endured since 1960.

One thing that Amoonguna has demonstrated is that many Aborigines who want to live in Alice Springs, given the choice between poor but improving physical amenities some 14 km outside Alice Springs and no amenities whatsoever within the township itself, will choose the latter. Even now, this preference does not appear to have been recognized by many Europeans living in Alice Springs and some still will not admit that Aborigines have a right to live at all in Alice Springs. As recently as March 1977, for example, an alderman is reported to have stated that all the Aborigines in the town camps should be removed from the town and dumped at Amoonguna with a high fence keeping them in. And so official discrimination against Aborigines in Alice Springs is perpetuated, and resentments grow.

<sup>16</sup>In 1960 the population of Amoonguna was 386; in 1962, 489; in 1964, 484; in 1965, 538; in 1966, 486; in 1967, 431; in 1968, 349; in 1974, 220; and in 1977, 150.



## Chapter 2

### Race relations in Alice Springs

The subject of race relations is a complex one which cannot be explored fully here. Since, however, relations between white and black Australians in Alice Springs impinge so strongly on all aspects of Aboriginal life, and particularly on housing, and have affected and still do affect black attitudes to whites, it is necessary to consider this subject, albeit briefly. In Chapter 1 the attitudes of white authorities to their black wards has briefly been indicated and in later chapters there will be further examples of such attitudes, all of which are based on the idea that one race is superior to the other and that the blacks have many types of behaviour which, to the whites, are unacceptable.

It should also be noted here that all Aborigines in Alice Springs do not share the same position *vis-à-vis* whites in the town: the extent to which an Aboriginal conforms to European culture helps to determine his relationship with the dominant group. One, for example, is a Member of the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly and deputy leader of the opposition. In his former capacity, he represents many Europeans in his electorate.

With few exceptions, white/black relations in Australia have been marked by negative features of every sort since the earliest contacts. In particular, they have been on an unequal footing, with the blacks in a subordinate position. As happened all over Australia, white settlement of Central Australia brought with it devastation of traditional Aboriginal practices. The whites entered the area, appropriated land and embarked upon economic pursuits which were inimical to the Aboriginal way of life. Few whites expressed qualms about their impact upon the indigenous population and, if anything, the Aborigines were perceived as sub-human obstacles to progress, as the following words written about white attitudes in the 1930s indicate:

Vince White was Deputy Chief Protector of Aborigines and was on his way back to Darwin from holidays.



He was employed by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. He knew much of the natives who lived like animals on the outskirts of Alice Springs (O'Grady 1977:9).

Other whites had even more extreme attitudes:

with few exceptions, the whites in Alice Springs regarded the indigenous people as the scum of a very nasty earth and acceptable only for what they could do in the form of work for the lowest possible remuneration. As Father Moloney had said, Alice Springs was populated mainly by 'black haters' (ibid.:14).

As long as the whites could see the Aborigines as something other than equal human beings, they could formulate policies and take actions which would have been unthinkable in dealing with their fellows. Thus, for example, it was quite common for Aborigines suspected of killing cattle to be summarily shot by policemen without so much as an attempt to ascertain the facts of the matter (Rowley 1970).

There was little appreciation of Aboriginal culture and values. Even those who were interested in these things tended to view the Aborigines in a patronizing way and not as equals. Those who advocated a policy of protection for Aborigines fit into this category. Thus, for example, the noted anthropologist, W. Baldwin Spencer, in a report written in 1913 after a year of close study of Aborigines, while expressing appreciation of cultural differences and acknowledging the integrity of Aboriginal ways, was able to recommend, among other things, that:

all Aborigines and half-castes should be either in compound or in their employers' quarters after sunset. A regulation should be passed forbidding them, except by special permit, to camp or wander about within the prescribed limits of any township between the hours of sunset and sunrise. Any Aboriginal or half-caste infringing this regulation should be liable to be locked up by a police officer (quoted in Stone 1974:142).

Official policies have changed over the years, but many of the basic attitudes of the white population have changed very little. Ignorance of Aboriginal culture, hostility to



Aboriginal people and overall racist views are widespread. Thus, for example, the policy of assimilation which officially became the joint policy of Commonwealth and States in 1951 was defined in the 1961 Native Welfare Conference (Rowley 1971:398).

The policy of assimilation means that all Aborigines and part-Aborigines are expected eventually to attain the same manner of living as other Australians and to 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 as other Australians.

It was based on the expectation that part-Aborigines (and eventually all Aborigines) would adopt the dominant European culture and thereby become part of a unified Australian culture. The inequity and lack of success of this policy was eventually recognized officially and after 1967 was gradually abandoned in favour of more tolerance of diversity. The McMahon government moved towards a policy of integration although within the government there was a wide range of opinions about the most appropriate policy approach towards Aborigines, especially with respect to recognizing traditional claims to land. The Ministers for the Interior, supported by their department, tended to take a conservative approach towards change in policy while the Council for Aboriginal Affairs, supported by the Office of Aboriginal Affairs, were the principal movers for change from within the government. What moves the McMahon government made towards integration subsequently gave way to the Labor policy which came to be identified as one of 'self-determination' for Aborigines. Although this policy was never adequately defined, the subsequent and current Liberal policy of 'self-management' has. By it, Aborigines will be required to play a 'significant role' in determining their long-term goals and objectives and in setting the priorities for expenditure. This policy appears to be predicated on the overall objective of Aboriginal groups moving towards economic 'self-sufficiency'. Therefore, to sum up, the period 1967 to 1972 saw an easing of the assimilation policy and after 1972 an official switch to permit Aborigines themselves to become the determinants of their future, or at least that was how the policy was presented to the public.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>For a short discussion of these policies as they affect housing see Heppell (1979).



For the man in the street, successive Aboriginal policies and all they intend count for little. In Alice Springs at least he does not appear to be particularly tolerant of diversity. For him, the only good Aboriginal is an assimilated one. As long as Aborigines do not conform to white standards, they will continue to suffer the disdain and rejection of those who see them embodying all that is antithetical to white mores.

Any discussion of racism in Alice Springs tends to focus on white views and attitudes. Undoubtedly, Aborigines have feelings and attitudes regarding whites and, as stated earlier, there were hostilities on both sides in the days of early contact. But it is impossible not to emphasize the dominant side in such an unequal relationship. White attitudes very much determine the nature of white/black relations. White policies have had enormous impact on the lives of Aborigines. For example, as noted in Chapter 1, the granting of land to pastoralists had immediate effects on the subsistence of Aborigines, forcing them to come begging to whites for sustenance in order to survive. The policy of assimilation in The Northern Territory has led directly to the collecting of Aborigines on government settlements and missions (often transported there by government officials: Meggitt 1962) and to their becoming more sedentary in their life style, more dependent on European goods and finally more interested in urban delights such as Alice Springs has to offer. Aborigines had no say in these early policies even though they directly affected many details of their own lives. Even when actions were taken with the best intentions (and they were not always) their effect was usually to undermine and injure Aboriginal life.

The Aboriginal experience has been one of subjugation by white violence and oppression; of relegation to reserves on land not of their own choosing; of having to live with other groups with whom they had little in common and who often were traditional enemies; of having the simplest decisions over their own lives taken away from them (e.g. until very recently many settlement Aborigines had their meals prepared for them. Rowley (1971:47) has described how, at Amoonguna, people were fed in 'categories, not families, mothers taking their babies to one feeding point, the pre-school children, the school children, and the adults all being kept in groups'); and of being isolated from and not being permitted to participate in the society which had complete control over them. The assumptions by whites of



Aboriginal incompetence to manage their own affairs and make their own decisions became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Aborigines were not consulted, not taught the skills necessary to operate within the dominant system, not allowed to make discoveries by trial and error in a supportive atmosphere. Until 1964, they were not even allowed to consume alcohol and yet are now blamed for not being able to handle drinking.

As a result of policies and actions which systematically separated Aborigines from their land, broke down their own systems of law, order and social control and made them almost entirely dependent on white beneficence for their very survival, Aborigines are now in a position of unpreparedness for the new responsibilities they are expected to shoulder as citizens within the ambit of the official policy of self-management. They are largely uneducated in the way the political and economic systems work, are unskilled and therefore unqualified for most remunerated occupations and are seriously disadvantaged in regard to health, housing and many of the other basic requirements for normal Australian life. Somewhat paradoxically, in the early days of settlement of Central Australia, their labour was vital to the establishment of pastoral properties and often to the survival of the pastoralists themselves, and, therefore, was widely used, though poorly rewarded. With advances such as the extension of the railway and the granting of award wages in 1968, the need for Aboriginal labour diminished. They were discarded and no effort was made to fit them for other work. Now, very often, the popular view of Aborigines in Alice Springs is one of dole bludgers and economic misfits, and the blame for this condition is placed unequivocally at the Aborigines' door. It is well summed up by these comments by an early settler and pastoralist's wife:<sup>2</sup>

There is no reason for any Aborigines around this district to go hungry, unclothed or remain ill. With social services, free medicine and treatment, visiting nursing sisters, church groups, etc. no Aboriginal child here has any right to be under-nourished or neglected. If they are, it is their parents' fault entirely for spending money on drink instead of food.

Has anyone noticed the number of overweight Aborigines around here? I resent the insinuation made by Aboriginal Congress [the Central Australian

<sup>2</sup>Letter, *Centralian Advocate*, 30 September 1976.



Aboriginal Congress] in regard to the medical staff at the Alice Springs Hospital. It was inferred that Aborigines judged them incapable and preferred to go to doctors they set up in practice for the benefit of Aborigines alone who were all European. But what happens when an operation and hospital treatment is needed? Do Aborigines then sneer and scorn the excellent medical service there which is good enough for the rest of us? The Alice Springs hospital is always more than half filled with Aborigines who get exactly the same care and attention as the Europeans do. That there are so many Aborigines hospitalized is often the result of too much alcohol and drunken fights. We might also ask, where does the money come from for so much booze?

There are no Aboriginal aides and nurses to assist Aboriginal patients at the hospital, as far as I know, none want to do this work. None (fullbloods) volunteer to train as nursing sisters and the same goes for wardsmen and hospital orderlies. I speak of fullblood Aborigines and not a mixed race. One cannot call a mule a horse - neither is it a donkey. To me, mixed bloods must have the characteristics of both races in looks and skill. After 100 years of settlement in Central Australia, where are the Aboriginal professional men and women? Education in Australia is here for all to take advantage of. There are no racial or social barriers.

For this lady there can be little doubt which race possesses the characteristics of a horse and which those of a donkey. In the whole of this letter, one finds not one grain of humanity extended towards Aborigines. Instead, the Aborigines are held entirely responsible for their present malaise. The writer, no doubt, was an exemplar of the proper way to live and for her, and many other whites, it is mandatory on the Aborigines to make all the adjustments and changes. The opportunities are there. All they have to do is to cast off their culture of millennia, quickly acquire a new and strange one, including a totally strange language, absorb the free education and then scale the barriers of resistance and prejudice.



In Alice Springs today, race relations are characterized by tension, hostility and ignorance. Racism is the monopoly of no particular political group nor of any class of society. In Alice Springs, it is expressed by left and right and public service alike, as Labor Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Senator Cavanagh wrote to his Prime Minister Whitlam:<sup>3</sup>

I am afraid I have viewed racism at its worst in the N.T. One particular incident worthy of note was the racist attitudes which greeted me by members of the Australian Labor Party at a meeting I had with them at Alice Springs. My department is currently carrying out investigations into accusations of racism shown by members of the Alice Springs office of the DAA and I am awaiting the results of this enquiry with interest.

Unlike most other cities and towns in Australia, Alice Springs has a highly visible Aboriginal population. That visibility, while it could be a healthy sign of racial and cultural diversity, serves to highlight very strongly the disparity between the two groups, as the English *Sunday Telegraph* correspondent, Peregrine Worsthorpe wrote:

At first glance it looks as if the main street of Alice Springs is littered with untidily stacked black plastic bags, all lying higgledy-piggledy on the pavement, their contents spewing out - like London during the dustmen's strike. But a closer look at the objects shows them to be groups of Aborigines squatting outside the bars waiting for opening time. At 10am they come to life momentarily. But only for so long as it takes to move inside where they spend the rest of the day silently drinking, until it is time to stagger back for the night to the dried-up river bed, which is where I first saw them.

Such is the daily routine of the respectable, law-abiding Aborigines, which is now so normal that the local whites do not seem to notice it. Unfortunately there is also a less well-behaved Aboriginal minority who, as well as drinking, commit crimes. About them the whites are less indulgent. Although the Abos comprise only 30 per

<sup>3</sup>Senator J.L.Cavanagh to Mr E.G.Whitlam, 11 February 1974.



cent of the Northern Territory population, they account for 90 per cent of the crimes. Only a few weeks ago a famous Central Australian grazier was shot dead, and five young Abos, aged between 12 and 26 have been charged with murder. Stories of armed hold-ups and rapes are disturbingly common, reviving all the old racial tensions. Very few Abos take jobs. So rare is it to see one gainfully employed that he or she becomes an object of some curiosity, like a freak. This is not because there are no jobs. It is because they do not need to work, all their wants being more than taken care of by the generous unemployment benefits which are the same for blacks as whites, in spite of the obvious differences in their respective outgoings. (It does not cost much to camp in a river bed.) In any case work in the Western sense is not part of their culture. Nor, presumably, is drink or crime. But some parts of Western culture seem more to their taste than others (*Sunday Telegraph* (London), 18 March 1979).

Worsthorne, a visitor to Alice, was undoubtedly reflecting some white views. They had been reported before. For example, shortly after Senator Cavanagh had described Alice Springs as 'a racial town faced with racial warfare', Cameron Forbes wrote in the *Age*:

And then there's Eddie the taxi driver. He knows a few things, too. That two sisters have been raped, one had her nipple bitten right off, and they're in a secret room in the hospital because it's all being hushed up to protect the coons. ... The Alice and the surrounding districts are full of people who 'know' things. There is a disturbing element of truth in some of the knowledge. But just as disturbing is the fact that the rumors become the reality for so many people. The fear is real and the hate is real, even if the basis for it is partly false. ... one Aboriginal man was painted white, a man who works with Aborigines was attacked ('Still helping those black bastards' was his only warning), and a public meeting of the newly formed Citizens' Association was told it was not safe for people to walk the streets alone for fear of being attacked, maimed, raped or even murdered (*Age* (Melbourne), 3 March 1975).



For many of the town's white people the Aborigines are objects of revulsion and fear because they so blatantly fail to conform to white norms of work, hygiene, housing and drinking behaviour. Rather than looking at the causes of this situation and then trying to seek remedies for it, the tendency is to 'blame the victim', a common practice in situations of inequality.

The action taken by the local Alice Springs shopkeepers, calling themselves the Todd Street traders (Todd Street being the main street in Alice Springs), illustrates the 'blame the victim' approach. On 22 February 1979 the Todd Street traders petitioned the Alice Springs Town Council to expedite the passing of by-laws to rid the town of groups which obstructed and fouled public thoroughfares. According to the petition:

Many shop frontages are becoming increasingly obstructed by bodies, litter, dogs, and the concomitant brawling, defecating, urinating, vomiting and obscenities which are indefensible in public places. Business is being disadvantaged in such an environment, external maintenance of premises is handicapped, and health risks are exacerbated as long as this pollution is rampant.

Aborigines were not mentioned by name in the petition. There could, however, be little doubt that Aborigines were the focus of the complaint, as Alderman K. McClelland inferred:<sup>4</sup>

It is not an attack on the entire Aboriginal race; it is a purposeful, well-presented petition by a group of people some of whom are closely attached to our pioneers and some of whom have worked with and among Aborigines years before. These traders have full respect for the well adjusted emancipated Aborigines who live and work in Alice Springs and obey the laws set down by our forefathers before us.

What distinguished the petition and made it difficult to defend in the sense that it did not have racial overtones was the way the behaviour complained about was generalized.

<sup>4</sup>Letter, *Centralian Advocate*, 23 March 1979,



A reasonable conclusion from the petition was that the behaviour occurred for much of the time, and the town itself was awash with vomit, urine and faeces. As Ross Howie of the Central Land Council remarked:<sup>5</sup>

There were more people on the streets, but there was not the kind of behaviour described in the petition. These were isolated incidents. References to them indicated an inflammatory, confrontational attitude. The speaker had walked down Todd Street many, many times and had never seen the acts described in the petition.

There seemed to be no increase in these sorts of offences, and if there was, then the police already had the powers to do something about it.

The official representative of the Judiciary, Mr Barritt, S.M., agreed that, through the courts, no change had been noticed indicating a deterioration in the behaviour of Aborigines or anyone else.

What had changed, however, was access to Colacag Park, which was where the central area public toilets were located and was a popular place for Aborigines to congregate. The park had been closed for safety reasons while the construction of a new civic centre was in progress, a fact surprisingly not mentioned in the petition. There was nowhere else for Aborigines to go in the centre of Alice Springs except the main street.

The traders also neglected to seek solutions to the 'problem' other than to request the provision of by-laws which presumably would have forced the 'problem' to go somewhere else. Providing satisfactory amenities, such as had existed at Colocag Park, might have been one approach, and this, according to the Aboriginal Tangatjira Council, had been proposed to the Town Council:<sup>6</sup>

The Corporation has refused the advice from Tangatjira, Congress, D.A.A., and other Aboriginal organisations about the need to provide more public ablution blocks in shopping areas and along the Todd River and at inner camps.

<sup>5</sup>Minutes of meeting called by Consultative Committee on Community Relations, 5 March 1979.

<sup>6</sup>Press release, 6 March 1979.



The Corporation gets over \$300,000 of Aboriginal money from D.A.A., each year but spends the money on less important work, in spite of our requests for toilets, showers and shelters at Taxi ranks and in parks.

In 1974, the DAA and the Northern Territory Housing Commission began discussions about a special housing program for Aborigines.<sup>7</sup> Agreement was reached between the Commonwealth and the Northern Territory about the manner of selection of tenants, the management of tenants including questions of evictions and the establishment of support systems such as the Homemakers' Service. In June 1978 the Town Council discussed the program which in its initial stage was to construct fifteen houses at a total cost of \$411,529 and renovate five others.

As soon as it was announced the program encountered difficulties. It was not helped by a Housing Commission spokesman who was reported as saying:<sup>8</sup>

so far there were 26 families on the waiting list. About 75 per cent of them were fringe camp dwellers at the moment and, as far as he knew, had not lived in a house before. The remainder had been Housing Commission tenants but had been asked to vacate - or had vacated voluntarily - because of 'rental and maintenance problems'.

The spokesman said the applicants were on a special list and 'have been assessed as being not capable of carrying out a normal HC tenancy'. As far as he knew 'very few' of the applicants had employment. ... The houses were specially designed to cope with large families or large numbers of visitors.

The mayor was reported as saying that the Town Council had not been consulted. An association calling itself the Citizens for Civilized Living suddenly materialized and complained that the program was a 'crash course in assimilation' and that people not used to European civilization should be offered half-way houses where they could learn the basics of western civilization.<sup>9</sup> A petition was drawn up

<sup>7</sup>'Aboriginal housing program, some facts': internal DAA memo (probably written by the Alice Springs director R. Huey), 8 June 1979.

<sup>8</sup>*Centralian Advocate*, 31 May 1979.

<sup>9</sup>*Centralian Advocate*, 31 May 1979.



and circulated (see Appendix I) which prayed to the Chief Minister of the Northern Territory that:

you cease forthwith the program on which you have embarked you cease to threaten the quality of life of your humble petitioners and that you arrange for the construction of a village to house your tenants away from the township of Alice Springs so that your petitioners will not be damnified as aforesaid.

A meeting was called of concerned citizens, by which time 128 signatures had been collected for the petition. The meeting was chaired by two prominent lawyers in Alice Springs, one of whom was shortly to become an executive member of the local branch of the Country Liberal Party. At the meeting, attention was paid to the fact that the houses concerned would be superior to the normal Housing Commission houses. Concern was expressed that property values in the vicinity of these houses would drop. Above all, great attention was paid to what it would be like to have such neighbours. The Country Liberal Party lawyer read from notes of an interview with one resident:<sup>10</sup>

it will be seen what occurs in Mill Street and what we foresee will be occurring in all these areas. About 1963 when we first arrived here in Mill Street, it was supposed to be occupied by an Aboriginal social worker. The problem was his family, you know, his relations, sometimes there would be up to 30 or 40 people in the yard and in the house and under the house sleeping. The fights and brawls that went on there were just unbelievable. We used to ring the police fairly regularly, but the people seem to realise the police were coming and everything just quietens down. As soon as the police have gone it starts up again and goes on all night and it goes on for weeks and weeks. Question, how do they dispose of their rubbish? It was just thrown out into holes and burnt for weeks and weeks. And we would have to put up with the smell. The direct neighbours would have to

<sup>10</sup>Cassette tape of meeting of Citizens for Civilized Living, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra. The election of the lawyer to the executive of the CLC Alice Springs branch was reported in the *Centralian Advocate*, 4 October 1979.



put a hose over the fence to put the fire out. There was no gardening done at all. The place just went to rack and ruin. All the trees which were in this particular block just died. They wrecked the clothes line ... Eventually one of the people there died in the front yard and they all left that house and the house was condemned by the health department and the house was pulled down. I think they had it occupied for about two years. I had a look inside the house after they had left it and there wasn't one wall which would have been intact. The tiles had been pulled up off the floor and the stove been pulled out from the wall. The toilet was just unbelievable. There wasn't a window in the place. Everything had been broken there ... They came into our yard, they came into our house during night time. I don't know how many times they tried to pinch my vehicle. We had a person come into our house about half past one into our bedroom. Fortunately he cleared out when we saw him but he was one of the same people arrested in a rape case of the girl and the RSL. It really frightened us. One particular neighbour straight over the road from this place left Alice Springs because of this. He had two or three young daughters and he couldn't put up with it. The abuse and so on. These people would stand on the balcony in the morning and urinate over the edge. If you said anything to them the language you would get back from them was terrible. I wouldn't have any hesitation about having an Aboriginal family next door to me if they behaved themselves in the way that society demands.

At the meeting, other people told their experiences, all of them derogatory of Aborigines. Fears of rape were often expressed. There was also a spirited defence of Aborigines by Frieda Thornton, an Aboriginal employed at the DAA. She pointed out that the Gap cottages were set up for the same purpose some thirty years before. The area was called Rainbow Town. Now the people who started out there 'are living nice civilised lives like me. The way you want us to live'. She continued that now people wanted to come in from Santa Teresa to live in Alice Springs and was asked why they could not stay at Santa Teresa. And so the meeting went on, well illustrating Cameron Forbes's contention that rumours became the reality for so many in Alice Springs. It also



demonstrates how racial prejudice is reinforced and proliferated in small towns like Alice Springs by emotional appeals to man's darker and basic fears like those of one's womenfolk being ravished, one's property being threatened (in the sense of value being diminished) and one's values being reduced to the level of the supposed animals who are to join one in the neighbourhood. Better than any assertions or description by visiting correspondents, this meeting of the Citizens for Civilized Living illustrates the fervour of racial prejudice in Alice Springs.

Of perhaps greater concern, at the political level, the campaign initiated by the Citizens for Civilized Living was partly successful. The Northern Territory government decided to reduce the number of houses constructed in the program to ten (and the probability that this pilot scheme is stillborn must be great). The official reason given revealed the government's concern to protect Aborigines from any discomfort that whites might promise, even if, by that protection, Aboriginal advancement would be held back. The member for Gillen and Northern Territory Minister for Education explained:<sup>11</sup>

In order for an assimilation program - for those Aboriginal people who quite rightly want to join an urban community - to occur, 2 things must happen: the Aboriginal people themselves must be satisfied that they are able to do it and there must be harmony.

... The important thing is that they [whites] believed that, by arbitrary government action, their life investment would be affected ... their belief [that it is happening] will reflect on their new neighbours ... There is no way in the wide world that this program had one snowball's chance in hell with that sort of ill-feeling developing between neighbours.

or as he was reported as saying:<sup>12</sup>

I was not pulled up once in the street by normal sensible, stable citizens on the casino issue.

<sup>11</sup>*Parliamentary Record. Northern Territory of Australia Legislative Assembly Debates*, 22 August 1979, pp.1710-11.  
<sup>12</sup>*Northern Territory News*, 20 October 1979.



I was stopped every four or five feet in the height of this issue, not by people saying, what are you doing bringing Aborigines into Alice Springs? but by people saying, Do you know what you are doing? Do you know the consequences of bringing the Aboriginal people in to a position where there is going to be resentment?

And so Aborigines were to be prevented from participating in the advantages that living in a town had to offer, and reasonable prospects of obtaining gainful employment (for there was none outside Alice Springs), to protect them from possible resentments on the part of whites. Part of the funds set aside by the Commonwealth government were returned to Consolidated Revenue, permanently lost to Aborigines. What the Alice Springs citizenry and the Northern Territory government appear to find difficult to comprehend is that it is not white resentments which they have to fear, but the ever-smouldering black ones. One day, with rejection after rejection, they may explode into the kind of racial violence (like the kind reported by Worsthorne when an innocent grazier was shot) which will give the white protectors of the status quo genuine cause for alarm.

If one can sum up the prevailing white view of the town camp residents and their situation, it is expressed in these terms: 'they' are dirty, lazy, live in squalor, receive generous government handouts (which are withheld from needy whites) which they spend irresponsibly, drink too much but cannot hold their drink and therefore brawl too frequently. 'They' also secretly lust after white women and, like animals, barely keep these desires below the surface. The most disturbing thing about the racial attitudes which prevail in Alice Springs is the lack of interest in and sympathy for the causes of the present conditions suffered by so many Aborigines and, in particular, the town campers. Instead, as well illustrated in this chapter, the enduring official and unofficial attitude has long been that Alice Springs should be purged of Aborigines.

Of course, not all whites in Alice Springs hold racist views or are ignorant about Aborigines, their history and culture. Many individuals and some organizations in the town are very sympathetic to Aboriginal interests and towards the goal of racial tolerance and amity. And many who are not involved are at least willing to deal with Aborigines in a civil manner as individuals rather than objects to be



labelled and dealt with according to the stereotype categories.

Before concluding this chapter, it might be valuable briefly to draw the reader's attention to a problem which affects government funded organizations and, indeed, the government itself, and its instrument of policy, the DAA. This is that many of the town's white residents are poised to criticize the expenditure of funds for Aboriginal benefit. The government is often described as too generous to Aborigines and many people gleefully point out costly failures as proof that the money is being squandered. It is again a curious paradox that Aborigines are under pressure to change and improve their circumstances, but many of their detractors would deny them the wherewithal to effect such changes and, more importantly, with a policy of 'self-management', the time and ability to explore means to meet their own priorities and requirements and the valuable experience of testing alternatives and learning from mistakes. In this respect, the government's will is being tested by Aboriginal detractors, and in the case of the Northern Territory government and the special housing scheme for Aborigines, the will has been found to be lacking. In the case of the Commonwealth government, with its increasing emphasis on accountability, it appears that it too is becoming less prepared to grant the Aborigines time and give them the patient support to make the changes which the government itself, by the very existence of its funded programs, is asking them to make.



### Chapter 3

#### The contribution of Aborigines to the Centralian economy

Aborigines have made a significant contribution to the Alice Springs economy, a fact which is seldom acknowledged, especially by their detractors. This contribution takes a number of direct and indirect forms. Unfortunately, no firm figures are available of the extent of this contribution, though it is likely to be substantial, and so, perforce, this chapter must be short.

To gain an accurate perspective of the current situation of Aborigines, we must look at the past.<sup>1</sup> With the loss of their land, Aborigines were placed in a position of no longer owning property themselves, and therefore largely having to rely on employment or welfare for survival. From the earliest settlement by whites in the area, Aboriginal labour was vital: both men and women worked with livestock, as labourers, household servants, etc. Not only their labour but the low remuneration they received for it<sup>2</sup> helped to ensure the financial success of their employers. Some Aborigines worked in the mining of gold, wolfram and mica; others worked on camel teams and other jobs. But with technological changes such as the extension of the railway line to Alice Springs and the introduction of vehicular transportation, the need for Aboriginal workers fell off greatly and they were simply dropped. Unlike some of their white counterparts, they did not have the skills, education or even knowledge of alternatives to go to other areas and seek work. Many, however, were not prepared to leave an area and their traditional lands and kin for the remote possibility that they would obtain remunerative work at some distant location. As Rowley rightly pointed out (1971:218):

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Penny and Moriarty (1977:19-24) for a useful summary of the changing economic situation of Aborigines.

<sup>2</sup>Until 1968, Aborigines were legally paid at a lower wage rate than whites to do the same work.



in a cash economy, movement requires money, and assurance on arrival at the next point of employment the person has as much chance of getting employment as the next man. Those who must depend on the kind of wage which has hitherto been paid to Aborigines in 'colonial Australia' cannot afford to move at will, nor can they be sure of equality in employment when they arrive. In fact, they must take into account, if they compete with non-Aborigines, the probability of being 'last on and first off'.

Aborigines in Alice Springs are still reliant upon employment or welfare for survival. Large numbers of camp residents are unemployed and there are few jobs available to them. Despite this fact, in 1979, according to Braddock (1979), there were only eighty-two Aborigines in the town claiming unemployment benefits. Amoonguna, which was set up to train Aborigines for employment, hardly offers an alternative, as Rowley (1971:46) notes:

As the whole area of the Amoonguna reserve occupies only two square miles, the 'settlement work force' which the Report [Welfare Branch, NTA, Annual Report, 1965-66] estimates at 115 men would hardly be employed on the farm and garden and in the making of cement bricks.

Dependency on some form of welfare payment is heavy. For the town campers at least, until 1976 when the Commonwealth government announced a 7-year program to house all town campers at a cost of \$8.5 million, there was little prospect of change because of the self-perpetuating nature of the conditions in which the campers were living. The previous chapter described the resistance put up by white groups to Aborigines coming to live in their neighbourhoods. The same attitudes are displayed in the employment field and it must be remembered that most employment in Alice Springs is at the discretion of whites. As Drakakis-Smith (1980a) notes, Aborigines are excluded from most of the major employment sources both by employer attitudes and by the complexities of the bureaucratic system.

Whatever their source of income, the Aborigines of Alice Springs spend virtually all their money in the town. These sums are swelled by the fact that the 7000 or so Aborigines<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>DAA Statistical Section Newsletter, Number 8.



living on pastoral stations and settlements in the Centralian region, which stretches from the northwest reserve of South Australia to Tenant Creek, directly or indirectly spend most of their money in Alice Springs. The indirect purchases are those made at local settlement stores which are supplied from Alice Springs. Drakakis-Smith (1980b) has estimated (conservatively) that direct expenditure by Aborigines in the town was approximately \$3.3 million in 1978, a figure based on surveys he undertook there. He noted that this income was derived from welfare benefits, earned income and money brought in by visitors.

Drakakis-Smith describes how poor storage in the town camps results in residents having to purchase prepared and semi-prepared foods from which they get less nutritional value for their money. According to him, certain supermarkets near town camps derive a considerable proportion of their turnovers from Aboriginal shoppers.

Another industry which benefits from Aboriginal money is the transport industry and especially second-hand car dealers and taxi operators. For all Aborigines, and especially those who live at remote settlements, mobility is an important factor of life. They represent the final purchasers of second-hand cars - before the cars are turned over to the scrap heap. They receive no money for trade-ins, for their previous car usually lies, largely dismantled, beside some remote track or on their local settlement car dump. For the second-hand car dealers, Aborigines represent an important market for trade-ins which have little life left and which would be scorned by a more discriminating European purchaser.

The other form of motor transport used by Aborigines is taxis. For example, according to Geoff Shaw, the director of the Tangatjira Council (interview 30 Nov. 1979), the principal use of the telephone installed at Mt Nancy was to summon taxis to take people into town. For town campers there is no other form of transport, other than walking distances up to 10 km. According to Drakakis-Smith (1980a: 440), the largest taxi company operating in Alice Springs admits that over 67 per cent of its daily business is Aboriginal. He calculated that at a conservative average fare of \$5 a journey, this would generate about \$120,000 worth of business per annum. The average fare is conservative, for many of the journeys are long distance, returning settlement Aborigines to their homes.



A significant contribution to the Alice Springs economy is made by government departments and statutory bodies acting on behalf of Aborigines. The Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs provides the most significant contribution, channelling funds to town camp organizations, to other Aboriginal organizations like Aboriginal Hostels, Central Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid, Central Australian Aboriginal Congress and Central Land Council all of which, in turn, employ Aborigines and some European professionals and tradesmen who spend their earnings in the town. Drakakis-Smith (1980b) writes that the Department spent almost \$4 million in Alice Springs itself. It also provides funds for the remote settlement councils and Aboriginal pastoral stations as well as providing funds for enterprises on these settlements. In 1979-80 these funds amounted to over \$19 million for the Central Australian region as a whole. Much of this money results in sizable purchases of materials, equipment and labour for commercial organizations operating in Alice Springs.

One of the major beneficiaries of this flow of money has been the Alice Springs building industry. Drakakis-Smith (1980b) writes that between 1977 and 1979, more than \$2.5 million was spent on Aboriginal housing in Alice Springs and its hinterland and most of these funds were channelled back to Alice Springs building companies. Further sums would have resulted from the Town Management and Public Utilities vote which for the whole of the Northern Territory in 1978-79 was \$12.197 million (DAA 1979). As Drakakis-Smith notes, the construction industry during the period 1977-79, when capital funding generally by the Commonwealth was reduced, looked increasingly to Aboriginal organizations for contracts which would keep the firms liquid during the economic downturn.

There is a paradoxical situation in the tourism industry which brought an estimated \$32 million to the Centre in 1977-78.<sup>4</sup> The image of Aborigines and their culture is used freely in advertising aimed at attracting tourists to the

<sup>4</sup>Northern Territory Tourist Board, Visitor Statistics (mimeo). The \$32 million figure is calculated as the proportion of visitors to the Centre in 1978-79 of the total visitors to the N.T. to the estimated revenue of \$53.5 million. The figure is largely confirmed by Drakakis-Smith (1980b) who wrote that, according to the Tourist Board, tourists spent over \$30 million in 1978 in the Central Australian region.



Centre. Yet the local Aborigines are often described by tourist authorities as an undesirable element which could mar the image of Alice Springs and dissuade tourists from visiting the Centre. The activities of the Todd Street traders described in the previous chapter supported this view. As well, the 1974 Camping sub-committee of the Alice Springs Town Management Board reported that complaints about the town camps included the impairment of the town's image among tourists.<sup>5</sup> Aborigines are confronted with the situation of finding themselves unwelcome in establishments which use Aboriginal symbols in their decorations and advertising. Certainly, apart from marketing artifacts, Aborigines themselves receive little financial benefit from tourism, none of the tourist operators employing any Aborigines.

Aborigines even contribute to the beautification of the township of Alice Springs. For example, in 1977, the DAA appropriated \$200,000 to the Alice Springs Town Council to employ Aboriginal workers on town improvement projects which would otherwise not have been carried out and which resulted in the repaving of footpaths and other improvements to the appearance of the town.

Drakakis-Smith (1980b) has attempted to calculate the extent of the Aboriginal contribution to the Alice Springs economy. He found it impossible to calculate the proportion of the \$46.3 million turnover in goods and services in the town which could be attributed to Aborigines. He did, however, try to calculate the proportion of the Alice Springs labour force which is dependent on the presence of Aborigines for their employment. Using 1979 Commonwealth Employment Service data, he calculated that 32 per cent of the workforce in the town owed their jobs to the presence of Aborigines. According to him, this is a conservative estimate, for it did not include any factor for those firms engaged in the local tourist industry which heavily emphasized Aboriginal culture and presence in their tourist publicity. If anything, popular opinion would lead one to believe that Aborigines are a negative force in the local economy. From the above discussion, however, Aborigines and the instrumentalities which serve their needs are a very important though generally unacknowledged asset to the economy of Alice Springs.

<sup>5</sup>Alice Springs Town Management Board Camping Sub-committee Report and Recommendations (mimeo), 1970.



In conclusion, we might consider what the Aborigines get in return for this contribution. This chapter has already noted that the tourist industry employs few Aborigines (a few domestics in motels) and the tourist operators none at all. According to Drakakis-Smith, less than 2 per cent of the workforce is Aboriginal despite the fact that the Aboriginal population is 14 per cent of the total Alice Springs population. Most of the Aborigines in employment are employed by Aboriginal organizations, which fact accentuates this basic inequality of opportunity. In 1978, Aborigines comprised 75 per cent of the total unemployed in the Centralian region. In a 1978 survey, Drakakis-Smith (1980b) found that in the town camps only 32 per cent of the adults were in full time employment while a further 10 per cent had part time employment. Only 28 per cent classified themselves as unemployed, and despite their reputation for being dole bludgers, only 50 per cent of these claimed unemployment benefits.

Drakakis-Smith argues that welfare capitalism is particularly important to the Alice Springs economy, with the consequent implication that any increase in Aboriginal self-sufficiency would result in the present system being threatened. With many jobs being dependent on the continued dependency of Aborigines on the welfare system, it can readily be understood why Aborigines are excluded from so many components of the Alice Springs economy. Whatever substance there is to this argument, it must be seen that the Alice Springs economy is heavily dependent on the increased Commonwealth government funding to Centralian Aborigines and probably far more than most whites would care to admit.



## Chapter 4

### The Alice Springs town camps

Despite the establishment of Amoonguna, increasing numbers of Aborigines have shown their preference for living in town by remaining on or taking up residence in a number of town camps (see Fig.2). Many of the town camps have long histories. Information about them, however, is sparse but what is available suggests that, until 1976, little had changed in the thirty years preceding 1977. For example, the Melbourne *Herald* of 15 June 1949 reported on the 'slum life' of sixty full-blood Aborigines living in a camp at Heavitree Gap (possibly the present Ilparpa camp). This camp was apparently established in 1945, after responsibilities for sanitary and garbage disposal were handed back to civilian authorities. The civilian contractor then hired the Aborigines and housed them in 'tin and bark humpies located 1/4 mile from the town's garbage destructor'.

On 29 December 1959, the *Herald* reported on the Morris Soak camp, where a group of forty-one Aborigines camped, according to the article, with the sanction of the administration. There was no garbage disposal and the only water available was in open 44-gallon drums which were replenished twice weekly by the municipal water cart. By 6 April 1960, the *Herald* was able to report that Morris Soak had been cleaned out and was once more a 'clean meadow'. The campers were removed to houses which had been condemned. According to the report, tenders had recently been called to demolish them. The tenders, however, were too low and none was accepted, leaving the houses for Aborigines to occupy.

In 1976, the future of the town camps was changed drastically with the promise of leasehold title being granted to some of them. By the end of 1977, twelve leasehold applications (see Fig.3) had been made for areas of land to be set aside for development by particular Aboriginal town camp groups. Each of these groups was characterized by a resident, stable core population plus a changing number of



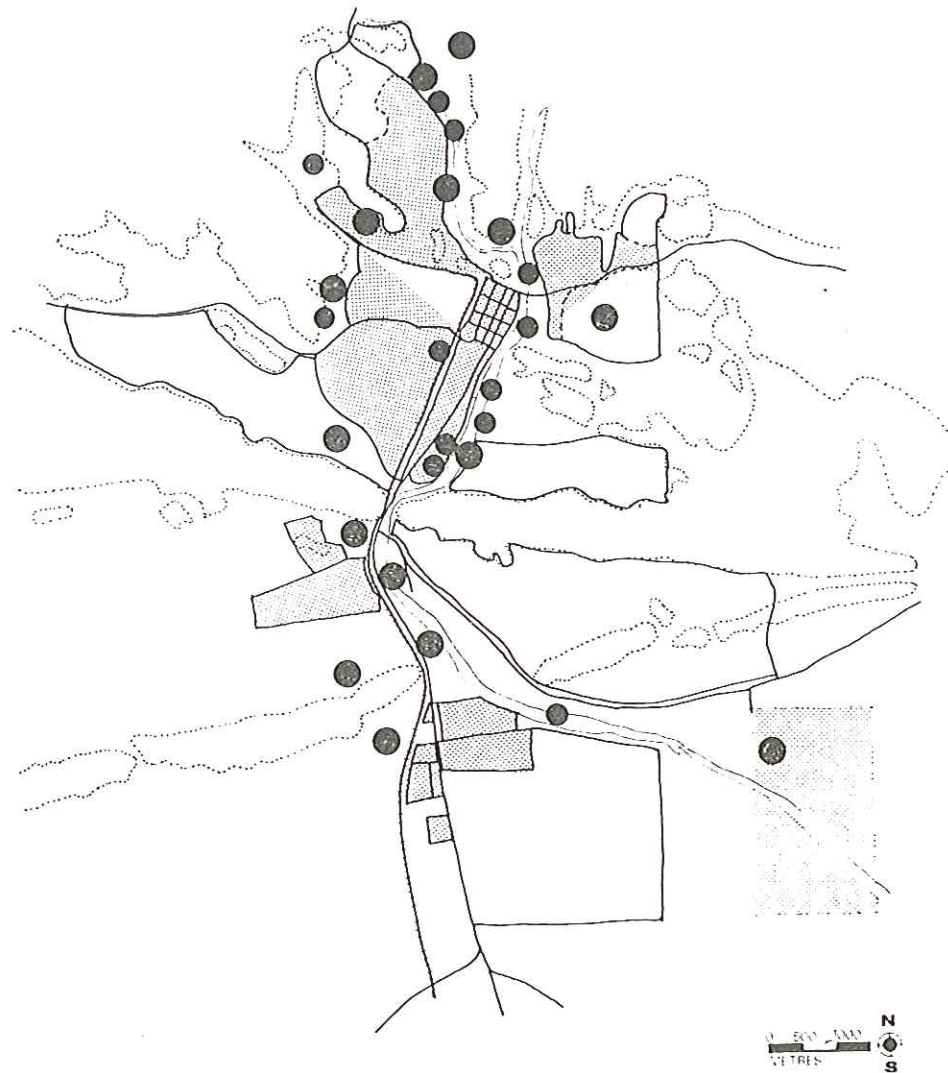


Fig.2 Alice Springs and environs showing the location of twenty-seven town camps



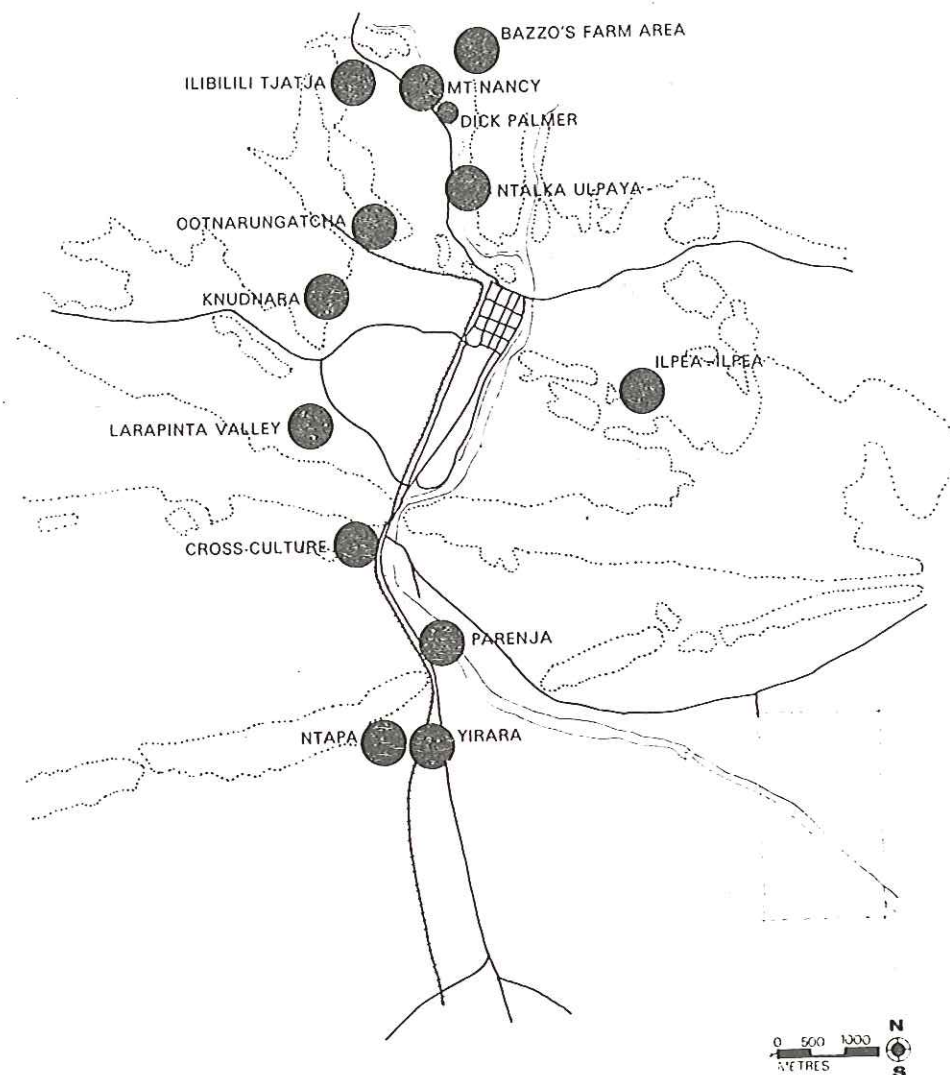


Fig.3 Location of twelve town camps in Alice Springs which had made leasehold applications by the end of 1977



visitors who come in from outlying areas and camp with relatives and friends. There have been a number of censuses of the camps, the adequacy of which have improved so that the most recent ones represent a reasonably accurate figure of the core population of each camp, though, as Table 2 indicates, the core populations can vary quite dramatically over time. The problem, however, with censuses, is that they usually count the number of Aborigines present on the day of the census, and ignore other members who might be away for a period visiting, attending to traditional business or working elsewhere. The wide variations in population even of individual camps and the differences in designation of permanent camps make the figures, and especially the earlier ones, highly suspect. What can, however, be inferred from these figures is that there is a stable core of permanent town campers which increased from something in excess of 450 in 1974 to a figure just under 900 in 1978-79. Visitors can increase this population, especially in the summer, to between 1000 and 1500. It should be noted that while there are permanent groups who camp together and while there are areas which are perennial camp sites, not all sites are permanent. Owing to such factors as insecurity of tenure, harassment, the lack of services, changing weather conditions, deaths and disputes, there is a certain amount of turnover among permanent camp residents which can result in occasional shifts of entire groups from one location to another. For example, when the leader of the Charles River camp was killed in 1977, the residents fled to all parts of Alice Springs. Guinness (1979) has recorded similar phenomena at Ootnarungatcha where all tents were dismantled and the camp abandoned in April 1979 after one of its members had been killed in a fight.

Thornton (1979) has rightly pointed out that town campers cannot be 'lumped together' in an undifferentiated whole. There are many different groups both within and between different camps with different world views, aspirations and needs. There are, however, certain features which characterize all the town camps. Therefore, a general description only of the camps is presented here and this description refers to the period before the recent building program began in the camps. Later in the monograph, certain camps will be described in greater detail to highlight particular features, experiences and responses (see also Appendix II).

Each camp is a small community based on ties of kinship and friendship. The residents are generally from the same community in the sense that there is a defined territorial



base which is shared by people who identify as members of the group residing there, and who have mutual interests, are relatively homogeneous and interdependent. There are psychological, social and territorial aspects to this residence pattern. The residents of the camps maintain traditional ties with kinsmen in traditional country and, outwardly, the daily activities of many town camps differ little from corresponding camps in Aboriginal settlements and missions outside Alice Springs. For example, Bell and Ditton (1979) describe how the lingua franca at Ilibilili Tjatja is Warlpiri. Traditional ties and laws appear strong. People are still expected to marry the right skin groups. Ritual life is still important, the women travelling to Yuendumu to perform important ceremonies (Warlpiri could hardly perform these ceremonies in Alice Springs, in Aranda country). All these factors distinguish a town camp from neighbourhoods of the European suburban sort characteristic of Alice Springs generally. The neighbourhood is a territorial entity in which residents may share social features such as income level, but which does not rely upon close interdependence of the residents. It is common in a suburb, for example, for people not to know even the names of some of their neighbours. In the camps people are intimately aware of each other's biographies and are very likely to be linked to each other by more than propinquity. Thus, the idea held by some that Aborigines should be placed in Housing Commission homes scattered throughout the town would undoubtedly seriously undermine the existing community orientation and consequently be rejected by most camp dwellers.

Geoff Shaw, the present director of the Tangatjira Council and one of the Mt Nancy leaders, has graphically described the conditions at Mt Nancy camp, the importance of the community and the battle that has been sustained to preserve and improve the amenities there. It is worth quoting at length, for it describes how an articulate town camper sees his situation:

I get good money for doing my job, but that money gets distributed through the camp. It might be a dollar here, a packet of tea there, or hand over some meat. That's how it is. That's how we keep going, all 60 of us. One wage and a couple of pensions, but the whole community spends it. We have to survive.

We are a community ourselves, but we want to fit into the overall town because we are here as part



of the town community. That is, we want the same type of facilities.

We can't afford to pay for a lot of the basic things. Even though some people get a wage, it can't be looked at in white man's economics because that pay gets shared.

Some people write letters to the editor calling us campers a health hazard, bludgers and so on. They do this because they don't want to see us living in this town. Another thing is they want us right out of town.

We've been fighting for years and years for a place to live, and we're going to keep fighting. White people want to get it through their thick heads.

Take the example of basic amenities.. Right where the community is now, 150 yards to the west, is a new housing subdivision. Streets have been put there, sewerage has been put in and the houses haven't been built yet.

Here we are, east 150 yards and have no sewerage but we are now building three houses after fighting hard for many years. But *we* have to use septic tanks.

This is because there's an agreement between the Department of the Northern Territory and the Department of Aboriginal Affairs to look after the interests of Aboriginals living in fringe camps but these two are locking horns, arguing over which one is going to pay for it. Why can't we have the sewerage facilities as supplied to the rest of the town without argument?

This is like a lot of things. We had to cart our water in buckets or roll 44 gallon drums to our camps for 200 to 300 yards getting the water out of a neighbour's tap. You cart water for cooking purposes, washing clothes and what's left for washing yourself? So you get a bucket full and go behind the scrub.

We had no shit houses so we used the scrub. In summer, the whirlies would pick up the remains, the paper and that, and blow it across into our neighbour's house. He complained to the Council. It took nine months of wrangling between the Health Department and the Department of Aboriginal Affairs to build some deep pit latrines. One of the reasons was you are not allowed to build permanent



structures on land you don't own. But we've got an ablution block now. It has taken a lot of time to get that far, since right back in the 1930s and 40s when our people decided to be part of this town. We see ourselves as part of this community although we've got tribal relations and are still tribally orientated ourselves, all of us who live in fringe camps.

It is somewhere for people to stay when they come into town. We are part of this town and want to live our lives without white people putting attitudes on to us.

... The tourists used to drive right into the camp filming us hanging up washing, eating, how we live. Tourist buses stopped so people could take pictures. The police came in all the time mostly for no reason at all.

We now have a lease over our land and have put a fence up. This makes it a bit better with the tourist thing. But the police keep driving in and we keep telling them that it is private property now. They have to have a good reason, not just 'we're the police'.

This is our 11 acres now, and important to us. It makes a big difference. Like the Housing Commission, four families over the years have moved into old N.T. houses over east side. They usually get evicted after a while for different reasons, mainly overcrowding.

They would have stayed in the fringe camps if houses were built because they are community orientated and stick with their own mob. We're not like Europeans who have one family visit them now and then. We can have up to three families visit at one time. This is our way.

So, seeing that we got this land we can put them up there without any hassles. Not like that trouble with the Housing Commission that is always happening.

During any wet an Inspector may call on your house when there are a lot of visitors staying, and tell you to kick them out. One fellow I know asked the Inspector would he throw his relations out when they were sick with cold, out into the wet. He probably got a warning that time. But somewhere along the way he'll get thrown out too, like people always do. I've got a grandmother. I want my



grandmother to stay with me. She is not a dependant. She is a pensioner. She can look after herself. That's what the Housing Commission thinks, because if I was in their house she could not come because she is not dependent on me. But in a fringe camp she can get support. I don't class old people as independent because they get an income of sorts. They feel strong back in the camp.

Look at the white community, say down at 'Old Timers', where their old people are shunted away and forgotten about. No one wants to know them. I'm waiting till I get these houses then my grandmother will shift in with me and the family.

... People who live in fringe camps keep their huts clean. They clean around the humpy alright. It's like this blind lady living under a tree down by the creek. She's got big mobs of kids. The area around that tree, a good 40 feet, is swept clean all the time. She can't get a house. How does she keep the rain off her head, what chance do her kids have?

But we all survive and keep trying to get people to realise and get it into their thick heads that we are here to stay, to have our communities and be part of the whole community (Shaw 1977:12-13).

Not only do the campers generally share linguistic or geographical origins: the camps themselves tend to be set up in areas which correspond to the direction closest to the residents' own traditional country. Permission to use a particular piece of land for a permanent camp has been granted by the Aranda traditional land owners of the country on which Alice Springs lies. For example, a Tangatjira meeting was told on 8 April 1974:

that the people in Little Sisters Camp had asked Aranda people if it was alright for them to apply for their lease. They gave permission to do so, and also to use the Aranda name for the area, *mpalytji* (Minutes of meeting).

Thus, as Guinness (1979) has noted, camps are not scattered randomly through the town. The western Aranda camps are close to their own sacred sites at Ilparpa and Ntapa as well as to the west of the town at Ootnarungatcha and Morris Soak, eastern Aranda camps are at Sadadeen and other locations to the east of the township, the Warlpiri are to the north



at Ilibilili Tjatja and to the east of the Stuart Highway, the Alyawara and Anmatjira are also to the north but west of the Stuart Highway at Charles River and Mt Nancy and Pitjat-jantjara are to the south at Little Sisters and Old Timers.

Before the recent development, most camp residents lived in owner-constructed humpies and windbreaks. A few had tents and fewer still lived in caravans. Some had no shelter at all (and still do not) and simply camped under trees or in the open air, as Dick Jungala, of Hoppy's camp, describes:<sup>1</sup>

I'd like to move out to other side of Mt Nancy because where I'm living now, belongs to all the Aranda tribe. I'd like to get a house because we need shelter and water. We been going with buckets about a mile a day to get water from the taps on the parks. When there's rain, we just sleep under the trees and sometimes, we use sheets of iron for roofing. Lots of Aboriginal people come in from everywhere to where I live, sometimes they find it real hard for sheltering from rain. I've lived here for forty years without house, waiting for something like this to happen.

A variety of materials, some of which have been discarded by whites as rubbish, are utilized in the construction of shelters. Humpies or shelters take a number of forms and sizes, but usually comprise a wooden frame of salvaged timber to which are tied galvanized iron or some other sheeting, and sometimes over which (especially when the galvanized iron is rusty) is laid tarpaulin or plastic. Some humpies are simply two posts and a ridge pole over which is slung canvas or tarpaulin. Humpies can vary in size from very small (1m x 1m x 1m) to reasonably large (3m x 2m x 1.5m high). The roof is usually important, and needs to be firm for it is the only place on which to store things out of the reach of dogs and young children.

A further important aspect of town camps is that they recognize traditional requirements of single people. Thus in many camps can be found single women's and single men's camps which cater not only for widows and widowers, divorced and unmarried adults, but also for spouses temporarily separated for a number of reasons, but often because of some

<sup>1</sup>Town Campers Newsletter 1977:1.



domestic squabble. In this latter respect, the camps serve an important function, allowing the parties to separate and find a group of same sex persons likely to give them support and advice and, when tempers have cooled, to help seek some accommodation between the parties enabling them to patch up their differences and continue their domestic relationship. The single men's camps are often quite noisy places, but they allow single men to give vent to their exuberance without disturbing nuclear families.

It must be stressed that, despite the inevitable constraints, Aboriginal builders of shelters are well aware of what they require and a number of factors are taken into account in the building process. Important factors are wind direction, the sun, location and storage facilities. One of the most important factors is that the structures are built in such a way that they can be quickly modified to suit the prevailing conditions.

Furnishings are at a minimum in the camps. Most shelters have an earth floor, though occasionally an owner may put down boards, bits of old carpet or rags collected from a refuse dump. A number of people have acquired old iron bedsteads, but rarely, if ever, is there one bed for each family member. Mattresses are seldom possessed; instead, blankets, old clothing and other items are used for padding. Chairs and tables can sometimes be found, but more often than not people improvise such items from boxes, tins and other materials as available. There are a few wood-burning stoves and one household at Mt Nancy, before the recent developments, had a hot plate and a refrigerator. Basic cooking utensils and dishes are owned by each household, but the variety and number are usually minimal. There is some borrowing and lending of items such as pots and pans between households. Again, there is improvisation, for example tea is usually brewed in 'billy cans' made from used tins to which wire handles are attached. Cupboards are a rarity. For storage, boxes, tins, trunks and suitcases are used. As material possessions of Aborigines increase, so has the importance of secure storage. This is especially true because Aborigines like to travel and want to be able to lock away their belongings and be sure that they are still there when they return.

Many of the materials used to build shelters and to furnish them are salvaged from the Alice Springs garbage tip. Many camp residents go to the tip to forage for items which



are useful and which they often cannot afford to buy. Town officials aware of this practice have attempted to thwart it by closing off the dump, but this approach simply ignores the reality, however unpleasant, that the tip is an important source of usable materials and objects for the town campers.

#### Physical conditions

Even those who have witnessed camp life at close range and all the hardships it involves are unable to appreciate fully and convey to others the entire experience because they have not actually experienced living in a town camp. Camping means living in the dirt. Most of the camps are on sites virtually denuded of vegetation (although a few are in lush and beautiful settings), and therefore lack shade and the softening effects of trees, grass, etc. In these conditions the camps are vulnerable to the vagaries of the weather which, in Alice Springs, covers an enormous range.

For much of the year it is hot and dry and, with little or no shade available, intense heat and glare are experienced. It is hot inside the shelters and out. (Some residents seek relief by setting up daytime camps in river beds or by building bough shades: both measures are time consuming and the shades require trees which are often difficult to find except by making long trips, requiring vehicular transport.) On windy days - which are quite common - dust is blown into everything (food, clothes, bedding, etc.). People and their belongings get covered in dust. (This is unavoidable since the shelters are inadequate to keep dust out and, as there is no ground cover like grass, there is nothing to inhibit the effects of the wind. Further, when dust gets into clothes, it is difficult to remove in the absence of decent washing facilities.)

✓ Discomfort from cold in the winter can be acute. The shelters, for those who are fortunate enough to have them, whether they be humpies, tents, or simply windbreaks, are not insulated and not draught proof. They therefore offer only minimal protection from cold winds. (It is not generally recognized that in Alice Springs) night time temperatures in the winter can fall as low as  $-8^{\circ}\text{C}$ . It can therefore readily be understood that sleeping on the ground with little warm clothing and minimal bedding and only a piece of holey galvanized iron between you and the outside can be extremely unpleasant. For much needed warmth, fires are built inside



the shelter. Though absolutely necessary, they require wood, which now has to be collected from far afield. Fires also introduce a fire hazard to the shelter. Aborigines still die in Alice Springs, incinerated in their humpies or tents as they seek a modicum of warmth.

Although the cold of the winter is extremely unpleasant for town campers, it is worse still when there is heavy rain. Although Alice Springs' rainfall average is about 254mm per annum, there are periods when this average is greatly exceeded. What is not generally appreciated is that rain often comes to Alice Springs in deluges and leads to flooding. At times of severe flooding, camp residents have had to be evacuated to other buildings in the township (e.g. March 1976 to the showground). While these buildings offer somewhat drier conditions, they hardly represent a satisfactory alternative.

Regardless of their location, however, no camps can escape the consequences of rain. In a short time everyone and virtually everything gets soaking wet. The ground is awash and mud is churned everywhere. There is no escape from the wet; food, clothing, bedding, all quickly become sodden. It is difficult, if not impossible, to cook, since wood, even if available, is wet and the ground is oozing mud. Sleeping under these conditions is near impossible, thus compounding the misery of the situation. Because of the lack of sanitary services to town camps, garbage and the excrement of humans and dogs may wash through the camps. This, added to the general wet conditions, greatly increases the risk of illness.

#### Services

The problems of weather serve to exacerbate the discomfort and inconvenience which characterize the camps even at the best of times. Until very recently, when the effects of the present government's program developed by the Housing Panel were beginning to be felt in some of the camps, maintaining even a low standard of hygiene required great effort. In no camps was water reticulated to each household camp site; so people had to carry water, often over long distances, for drinking, cooking, bathing and laundering. For example, in 1973 the Ootnarungatcha community had to walk over a quarter of a mile to the Trucking Yards to obtain their water. The DAA approached the Department of Works to try to improve this situation but was advised that it was highly unlikely that it would be practicable to tap the mains



and reticulate water to the camp area as:

- 1) A request for a mains tap would not be actioned for approximately 6 months.
- 2) Such a tap would very possibly interfere with the water supply to regular users such as Humes, Abattoirs, Trucking Yards, etc.
- 3) Costs of running approximately 1/4 mile of copper piping from the mains to the camp area would be prohibitive.<sup>2</sup>

Many camps had water delivered twice a week by welfare authorities and stores in open 44-gallon drums which created an obvious health hazard. (As recently as 1978, a number of camps still relied on this service for their sole water source, e.g. Ilpea Ilpea and Malbunka's.) The only privacy a person could obtain when bathing was inside his humpy, an onerous activity given the cramped space. One has only to glance at Appendix II to see how few camps had ablution blocks. In these circumstances, it can readily be understood how difficult it was (and still is for many) to keep young children clean. It is hardly surprising that the kinds of pressure generated by strictures of critics such as the one on p.30 have had a great impact on young town camp children and have led to absenteeism and even complete withdrawal from school because of the shame children felt over their physical appearance and state of cleanliness.

Although several camps now have electricity, for most it is a recent introduction. Even in those camps which do have electricity, it is not connected to each dwelling. This means that it only provides general area lighting (which is important because town campers perceive themselves as living in a hostile environment which is particularly dangerous at night when intruders, snakes, malevolent spirits and the police are potential threats to their well-being) and lighting to ablution blocks.

After dark, the insides of humpies are without light except for candles, lamps and torches. This has a number of important consequences. In particular, children's activities are seriously curtailed. No homework can be done after dark

<sup>2</sup>A.S.Barker, Senior Clerk to Regional Officer (S), 9 November 1973. Note for file.



(there is usually nowhere to do it anyway). Reading, by anyone, is out of the question.

Such items as irons, electric frying pans, space heaters and refrigerators would be used by many people if power was available and the resources possessed to acquire them. Refrigerators, for example, are of vital importance in a place as hot as Alice Springs is for much of the year, and in town camp locations, the great majority of which are far from the nearest shops. For example, Ntapa and Little Sisters are about 8km from the shops, and since so few people have motor vehicles, transport is not readily available.<sup>3</sup> Without refrigerators perishable food cannot be stored for more than a day or two and in the summer not even that long. This means that fresh fruit and vegetables, meat and dairy products, must be purchased daily and consumed immediately. People therefore eat a high proportion of canned foods, flour and other non-perishable foods.

Not only is food storage a serious problem but food preparation also presents difficulties. A few people own wood stoves. Most, however, cook over wood fires, usually in some adaptation of grills, plates and drums. During wet weather, cooking in the open is next to impossible, for there is no dry storage of wood, and this is the very time when people are cold and wet and something as simple as a hot cup of tea would do much to revive flagging spirits and shivering bodies.

Insufficient storage is a perpetual problem in the camps. There is very little room inside a humpy for cupboards or other furniture, so even the few people who own such items have difficulty fitting them in. Clothing and personal belongings are usually stored in suitcases, boxes, bags and tin trunks. These containers are placed on the floor and may double as seats or tables. There are no shelves and nowhere to put things up high, out of the reach of small children and dogs, except on top of the humpy where they are exposed to heat, rain, dust, wind and flies. Valuables may be locked in tin boxes or kept in bags, under blankets, etc., but there is nowhere to store any sizable item safely and privately.

<sup>3</sup>The Central Australian Aboriginal Congress provides a bus service to enable some camp residents to shop. But this is an irregular and unreliable service since there is greater demand than there are vehicles to provide seats.



### Health

One of the very serious consequences of camp life under the conditions described above is poor health among the residents. The incidence of infectious and contagious diseases is higher in the camps than in the town at large. Gastro-enteritis, respiratory diseases and parasite infestation occur with alarming frequency.

The Central Australian Aboriginal Congress (CAAC) has commented on the health risks attendant on living in a town camp:

The majority of these people [living in town camps] live in grossly overcrowded and sub-standard housing and few have even the barest facilities such as toilets. There is a large number of unemployed men not receiving any benefits and obviously the only method of survival is by sharing the limited income from pensions and the few relatives (*sic*). The diet of these people is poor with concentrated or canned and prepared food. Most of the conditions are similar to fringe areas in Africa and Asia.

Most health workers recognize that the major difference in health between Aboriginal people and the white population is related to the vast difference in physical and social environment. ... There can be no major improvement in health until people live in good houses, have adequate hygiene facilities and sufficient income to provide good food (Cutter 1976:6).

### Social factors

The social penalties for living in the camp situation are many and varied and are difficult to pin down though unquestionably existent. Camp residents are frequent victims of what might be seen as varying degrees of harassment by uninvited intruders into the camps. In Department of Native Welfare days (before 1972), these included not infrequent visits by a group of government officers including the Native Welfare Town Patrol Officer, a truancy officer, an officer from the Welfare Department, and a member of the police force with the specific and acknowledged objective of harassing 'transients' to go and live at Amoonguna. In 1978, the worst offenders were the police, who might enter



under  
 camps at any time looking for people, young men on trail bikes who invaded camps from time to time to 'do them over', and health inspectors who could be extremely officious over the inadequate amenities at town camps.

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 The camp residents also have to live with other indignities. They are lumped together as the target of scorn and rejection by many whites, for example letters to local newspapers often speak of them in general terms which implicate all camp residents for infractions of which few are guilty. More subtle, but also perhaps more devastating, are the many unwritten rules which relegate the campers to an inferior position in the town, obliging them to wait in shops to be served last and when there is no one else to serve, to be excluded from certain establishments, to be avoided by people in the streets of the town and to experience the tensions which go with rejection of them and their entire way of life.

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 Finally life in the town camps has meant being caught in a vicious cycle of deprivation out of which it has been impossible to escape. Children grow up in the camps and know nothing but their physical and social limitations; and their parents have not the wherewithal to alter these circumstances. They reach maturity with little hope of doing other than their parents have, and they are blamed by the dominant society for their abject state. When change does come they are expected to accept it and adapt immediately, although they may lack any experience to equip themselves for this. Thus, for example, people who have never had toilets are provided with two (as happened at Mt Nancy camp) to serve eighty users and then are condemned for misusing them. These cynical standards are repeated in virtually every aspect of life for the camp residents. It is therefore vital that agents such as government departments be mindful of these limitations and therefore of the necessity to take measures which will ease adaptation to changed conditions at the same time as they seek to achieve those changes. This is particularly important at the moment, when the physical amenities in the camps are to be transformed in the next few years. Yet, at the time of writing, the Homemakers' Service of the NT Department of Community Development appears to have been run down (Thornton 1979) and despite a number of requests for such a service by the Tangatjira Council, no funds have been granted the Council to set one up.



## Chapter 5

### Alternative accommodation

Only about 30 per cent of Aboriginal residents of Alice Springs live in the town camps, but most campers, given the choice between living in suitably designed housing in the town camp of their choice and in a conventional three-bedroom Housing Commission house, would choose the former.

The town camp provides a recognized order and ready community to which visitors can attach themselves. They can be sure of obtaining shelter among kin with whom they have an established set of reciprocal obligations, and can be reasonably certain that everyone else living in the camp, if not immediate kin, are members of the same tribal group and, therefore, linked by historical ties of amity. For many visitors, then, institutional hostels, however well they might cater for their residents, are, for the foreseeable future, likely to be less attractive than the less comfortable amenities obtainable in the town camp of their choice. In this respect, the government should take cognizance of the important role that town camps play in catering for Aboriginal visitors to Alice Springs and should consider carefully the kinds of development in the town camps which would enhance this service. Neglect of this important aspect of town camp life will increase the burdens of the permanent residents to the detriment of the whole community and attempts to force visitors or 'transients' to live in institutional hostels are likely to be as successful as previous attempts to force these very same people to stay at Amoonguna.

However, as not all permanent residents of Alice Springs and not all visitors choose town camp life, it is necessary to examine the alternative sources of accommodation available to the Aboriginal.

### The Northern Territory Housing Commission

In keeping with the earlier policy of assimilation, it has been and still is suggested by many people (e.g.



Commonwealth of Australia 1971-76) that the Northern Territory Housing Commission should be the source of housing for all Aboriginal residents of Alice Springs. As the Housing Commission is reluctant to place Aboriginal families without previous experience of living in a house, some sort of preparatory stage is envisaged in which Aborigines would be exposed to the 'demands' of living in a house. To this end, a number of transitional houses were built at Amoonguna and, in 1960, the NTA built houses provided under the part coloured housing scheme. They were located in the Gap area and the east end of Alice Springs, an area which came to be known as Rainbow Town. The idea was that once the occupants of these houses had passed all the domestic tests, they would then be able to convert to Commission houses and flats dispersed throughout the predominantly white suburbs of the township.

It was, however, often difficult for an Aboriginal family to be accepted for the NTA accommodation in Alice Springs. For example, Father K. Summerhayes, the Superintendent of the Santa Teresa Mission, many of whose residents were old Alice Springs residents and had moved to Santa Teresa via Arltunga when the Little Flower Black Mission was removed from Alice Springs, put forward the names of five families whom he judged 'most suitable' for transfer to live in Alice Springs.<sup>1</sup> The Welfare Branch reply was not promising.<sup>2</sup> It pointed out that as two-bedroom houses were usually available, a couple of the families would have to be eliminated because they each required a 'hostel'.<sup>3</sup> There was also 'no reason' why two of the other families would be considered for a house because one of the conditions for getting one was that the applicant must be in employment on full award wages. (It was not until 1968 that Aborigines were paid award wages in the pastoral industry. In 1966, when this request was made, Aboriginal wages, at least for full bloods and those living on missions and government settlements, were governed by the Wards' Employment Ordinance, by which wages were fixed administratively by notice in the Northern Territory Gazette (Rowley 1978:149). The rates were considerably less than award rates.)

<sup>1</sup>Father K. Summerhayes to the Assistant Director, Southern Division, Special Welfare Branch, 19 February 1966.

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Director, Southern Division to Rev. Father Summerhayes, 31 March 1966.

<sup>3</sup>The families had nine and seven children respectively. Under the former's details was handwritten: 'This bloke needs a hostel not a house'.



Perhaps the positive features of town camp life are the chief reason that so many Aborigines reject the Housing Commission accommodation. There are, however, other less important reasons which reflect, rightly or wrongly, on the general impression gained by town campers of the Housing Commission as landlord. First of all are the formalities which have to be undergone by a prospective applicant and the probability that that application will end in rejection.

When camp residents apply for Housing Commission accommodation, their suitability is checked by a Housing Commission representative, who then recommends their eligibility for a Commission house. The representative of the Commission seeks evidence that an applicant can meet the tenancy requirements of a Commission house, which include a number of domestic virtues and, hardly surprisingly, in the conditions of the town camps, finds none. Smith (1972) found that of sixty-three current Aboriginal tenants, only two had been living in camp conditions before the tenancy. One Aboriginal applicant recently received the following refusal, which can be regarded as typical:<sup>4</sup>

Further inspections have been carried out of your camp and unfortunately the domestic standard displayed is not to that expected of Commission tenants. It is expected in the future that the Commission with funds provided by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, will be able to supply transitional housing to assist applicants such as yourself. At this stage you are advised that your application is cancelled.

Chapter 2 has already described the attempt by the Housing Commission to build 'transitional housing' in various suburbs of Alice Springs and it remains to be seen whether or not this attenuated pilot scheme will be extended after the first ten houses are completed and occupied by 'transitional' Aboriginal tenants. One must also note unfortunately the short-sightedness of the Hay Inquiry which recommended that 'in rural and urban areas, resources for housing go primarily to Housing Commissions' (Hay 1976:62).

No statistics of the number of Aboriginal tenants evicted from Housing Commission houses are available. According to

<sup>4</sup>Housing Commission Northern Territory to Mr A.E.....a, 22 February 1977.



Braddock (1979), there has only been one eviction of an Aboriginal tenant since 1969, an assertion which is in stark contrast to the verbal opinion of Aborigines in Alice Springs. She does, however, note that rent reminders might often be interpreted as eviction notices so that people move out prematurely. In the only available report on Aboriginal Housing Commission tenants in Alice Springs, Smith (1972), although attempting to ascertain the kinds of difficulties experienced by Aboriginal tenants in Housing Commission houses, unfortunately did not or could not examine the files of those evicted.

In a report prepared for the Department of Native Welfare, NTA, Smith compared the histories of five full-blood and seventy-four mixed-blood Aborigines with a control sample of twenty Europeans. Difficulties, as defined by the Commission, were experienced by Aboriginal tenants in three main areas:

- a. Rental arrears. 40.5 per cent of the Aboriginal tenants had had arrears notices served at an average of 3.4 per tenant compared with 20 per cent of the Europeans, averaging 1.7 per tenant;
- b. History of repairs and maintenance. This was broken down to five categories based on cost of repairs and maintenance incurred by a tenant as per Table 3.

Table 3  
Costs of repairs and maintenance

	Aborigines	Europeans
	%	%
Nil	30.37	40.00
Under \$50	31.65	50.00
\$50 - \$100	12.66	10.00
\$100 - \$200	10.13	Nil
Over \$200	15.19	Nil
	100.00	100.00

- c. Illegal occupants. Section 2(h) of the Tenancy Agreement forbids anybody other than the wife and unmarried children of the tenant to reside on the premises unless express permission is granted by the



Commission; 24 per cent of the Aboriginal families had received official letters from the Commission advising that this rule was in breach compared with 10 per cent of the control sample. Smith concluded that:

The problem of illegal occupants appears, however, not to create great difficulties and the pattern observed was for these people to move to other accommodation once the Commission took official action in the form of a letter to the tenant and in many cases serving a Notice to Vacate on the illegal occupant.

One cannot but express surprise at this conclusion, for talking to former Aboriginal tenants of the Housing Commission, one quickly gains the impression that exclusion of relatives was the principal difficulty they experienced (see for example Geoff Shaw's comments about his grandmother quoted in Chapter 4). The repairs and maintenance statistics which show 26 per cent of Aborigines experiencing repairs costing over \$100 compared with none on the part of Europeans also suggest that overcrowding might have been a factor among Aboriginal tenants. In this respect, one wonders whether or not a different conclusion would have been reached had Smith examined the files of evicted tenants.

One thing Smith's report does conclusively demonstrate is that the Mills Street phenomenon, described so vividly by a speaker at the Citizens for Civilized Living meeting, hardly seems to accord with the facts of the Housing Commission. Certainly the wholesale destruction of houses by Aborigines as a group seems not to have taken place.

It is difficult to be precise about the number of Aboriginal tenants of the Housing Commission in Alice Springs as the Commission does not admit to keeping separate statistics for Aborigines. In 1972, the Alice Springs office of the Housing Commission was able to identify five full-blood tenants, eighty mixed-blood (one of whom Smith did not consider an Aboriginal) and twenty-two Europeans with Aboriginal spouses. The average length of tenancy was 4 years 7 months, ranging from 11 years 2 months to 2 months. We can conclude from this that the Housing Commission did not start to accept Aboriginal tenants until about 1961. By 1967, there were apparently four Aboriginal families in Housing Commission houses, six who had applied for a house



and none who were being considered for a house.<sup>5</sup> By 1969, the number of housed had almost tripled, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Aboriginal tenants and applicants for Housing Commission houses, 1 December 1967 to 13 August 1969

	Tenants	Applicants
1 December 1967 <sup>a</sup>	6	4
8 February 1968 <sup>b</sup>	7	5
19 April 1968 <sup>c</sup>	7	5
4 July 1968 <sup>d</sup>	7	4
13 August 1969 <sup>e</sup>	11	7

Notes: a Memo Acting Assistant Director (S) to Director of NTA Welfare Branch, 1 December 1967.

b Memo Acting Assistant Director (S) to Director of NTA Welfare Branch, 8 February 1968.

c Memo Acting Assistant Director (S) to Director of NTA Welfare Branch, 23 April 1968.

d Memo Senior Social Worker to Director of NTA Welfare Branch, 4 July 1968.

e Memo Assistant Director (S) to Director of NTA Welfare Branch, 13 August 1969.

The figures tell only part of the story of tenancies. For example, between February and April, one of the families housed had left while another had been housed. By July, that family was no longer housed.

In the 1970s, the Housing Commission must have made a greater proportion of its stock of housing available for Aborigines (or, of course, a number of part-Aborigines who

<sup>5</sup>The Assistant Director (S) (letter dated 8 September 1969) pointed out to the Director of the NTA Welfare Branch that distinctions between Aboriginal and part-Aboriginal were poorly defined, and that some Aborigines lodge applications without the help of his office. Therefore the only way to ascertain the full figure would be to conduct a full survey.



formerly would not admit to being Aboriginal are now proud to do so), for by the end of 1977 the Commission estimated that 20 per cent of its 850 dwellings (i.e. 170) were occupied by Aborigines, and this figure had risen to an estimated 200 in 1979 (Braddock 1979) with fifty-five more families on the waiting list.

The Housing Commission, as Braddock notes (1979:10) caters for a 'fairly discrete group' of Aborigines, 65 per cent of the tenants being employed and a majority of the remainder receiving social security or unemployment benefits. In this respect, the Commission plays a major part in providing housing for the significant number of non-tribal Aboriginal people who are more or less culturally integrated into the wider community.

In 1978, the Housing Commission became involved in a program to provide special housing for Aboriginal families who would be rejected for normal tenancies. The housing was to be a normal Commission house with high fences 'for privacy' (Braddock 1979:13), an outdoor cooking area, an additional toilet for the use of visitors and tougher internal fittings. These were the houses which became the focus of attention of the Citizens for Civilized Living (see Chapter 2).

Inasmuch as camp residents appear to have special difficulties in obtaining Housing Commission houses and in meeting the tenancy requirements, it is unfortunate that separate figures on their occupancy are not kept. It would be useful to have such figures in order to assess the actual and potential role of the Commission in providing housing. The question of who would be the most suitable landlord for camp residents is an important one. A large bureaucracy would appear to have almost insuperable difficulties in respect of catering for the very particular housing needs of tribally oriented Aborigines taking up an urban residence and the many problems that a family in transition might face in a new environment. The advantage of making town camp associations responsible for their own housing schemes is that each family in the camp is well known to everyone else, their own personal problems and difficulties are also well known and are likely to get the immediate and sympathetic treatment from other members which will assist them to overcome these problems. For the Housing Commission, any



particular social or emotional problems being experienced by a tenant are rarely of great import. What matters is whether or not the tenancy agreement is observed. If it is not, and the warnings are not heeded, eviction is the remedy. With eviction, what might have started out as a containable social problem could well become a catastrophe for the victims of such treatment.

#### Other accommodation

Aborigines, as a group, are disadvantaged in terms of access to other accommodation in Alice Springs. Braddock (1979) has presented some useful information about access to housing in Alice Springs for Aborigines and the following is taken from her report.

Both Territory and Commonwealth governments own a substantial number of houses and flats for rental on favourable terms to permanent employees of the services. Disproportionately few Aborigines are employed in the public service largely due to their poor educational opportunities and attainments. In July 1979, there were only five Aboriginal tenants of government housing, taking up only 0.85 per cent of the total available.

In the private rental market, Aborigines fare little better. According to Braddock, of the 750 houses and flats for rent, only 10 (1.3 per cent) have Aboriginal tenants. Braddock explains this small percentage by the fact that Aborigines are excluded from the market by the high cost of rental accommodation. The explanation seems only partial, for it would be surprising if none of the Alice Springs landlords hold the kinds of attitudes which find their expression in gatherings like that of the Citizens for Civilized Living.

Given their low incomes and poor work prospects, the opportunities for Aborigines to purchase private houses in Alice Springs are poor. The Aboriginal Loans Commission does advance funds on favourable terms to Aboriginal applicants but it was unable to help Aborigines in Alice Springs for a number of years because of its policy of advancing funds through terminating building societies. In 1974, when the Commission began its operations, there were no terminating building societies in Alice Springs. Since that date the Commission has only provided four home loans to Aborigines in Alice Springs. The Northern Territory Housing Commission



runs a sales scheme for tenants of two or more years' standing. In 1979, there were ten Aboriginal families taking advantage of this scheme. In 1979, therefore, of the 1037 owner-occupied houses in Alice Springs, it is doubtful that more than ten (0.96 per cent) would be owned by Aborigines.

Table 5 shows the proportion of houses available in Alice Springs that are occupied by Aborigines. Taking an

Table 5  
Alice Springs housing stock

	Total	Aboriginal occupied	Aboriginal occupied as % of total
Housing Commission	925	193	20.87
Australian National Railways	80	11	13.75
Government <sup>a</sup>	592	5	0.85
Private rental	750	10	1.33
Private	1,037	10	0.96
Housing Commission in course of purchase	165	10	6.06
	3,549	239	6.73
Population 1979	16,025	2,500	15.60

Note: a The number of Commonwealth Government houses (326) occupied by Aborigines was not available. The figure, however, is likely to be extremely low.

average family size of five, Table 5 suggests that approximately 1200 Aborigines or 48 per cent of the Aboriginal population are housed in Alice Springs if we assume single tenancies. The problem of the relationship of houses to unhoused, given Aboriginal values, is further exacerbated by the numerous Aboriginal visitors to Alice Springs who tend to stay with relatives. In their relationship with the unhoused and visitors, the housed are placed in a dilemma. They can offer hospitality to these people, overcrowd their houses and risk having their landlords evict them for breach of the tenancy agreement. Alternatively, they can refuse to accommodate them and risk being cut off by the Aboriginal community and thus, from their very roots and, in adversity,



the one group in the town which would help them. Certainly, one can argue that so long as a majority of Aborigines remain unhoused in Alice Springs, the problems confronting many of the housed are no less great, though different, than those confronting the unhoused.

#### Temporary accommodation

The majority of visitors to Alice Springs from outlying areas find shelter with relatives and friends resident at one of the town camps. Layton *et al.* (1979) have summarized the main reasons for Aborigines visiting Alice Springs:

- a. For medical treatment either in hospital or at the CAAC clinic and to visit sick relatives. The numbers of Aborigines seeking hospital treatment are substantial. For example, Alice Springs hospital treated 2583 Aboriginal outpatients in 1977-78.
- b. To attend official meetings and courses.
- c. To shop.
- d. For a holiday.
- e. To play in some sports competition.
- f. To visit children at Yirara College, a secondary boarding school for Aborigines.

For people not intending to stay too long, there are a number of hostels and mission houses which cater especially for Aborigines. These institutions offer shelter at nominal fees and most of them will waive the fee if the person is unable to pay. Even though these facilities are available, they are quite insufficient to fill the need for temporary accommodation, especially at busy periods when the influx of visitors is high.

Two missions provide temporary accommodation for visiting Aborigines, namely the Institute for Aboriginal Development (a hostel set up for the Pitjantjatjara and which can accommodate approximately thirty) and the Finke River Mission (which runs a 15-room block for the Aranda).<sup>6</sup> There

<sup>6</sup>The Santa Teresa Mission also provided accommodation (for approximately 21 people), but according to Braddock (1979: 23) it was closed down in 1978 (possibly as a result of the extension of an STD telephone link to the mission, which no longer required a service centre in Alice Springs.)



is little in the way of temporary accommodation for Aborigines from the north like the Warlpiri, Luritja, Pintubi, Anmatjira and others.

These hostels provide very basic accommodation with communal ablutions and cooking facilities. They are patronized as they do offer shelter from the elements in surroundings which are familiar. Visitors generally prefer to stay where they have relatives or friends, but even if they do not have connections at the hostels, they may choose one because it is affiliated with their home country (mission) or linguistic group.

A more recent entry into the Aboriginal hostel market is the Commonwealth funded Aboriginal Hostels Ltd. In Alice Springs, Aboriginal Hostels operate the former Hole-in-One hostel, which houses 50-65 in one-room units with communal cooking facilities. Residents may spend up to 3 months in the hostel, but although indefinite stays are not feasible, there is flexibility in the application of the time limit. Charges are assessed on the ability of the client to pay.

Sometimes persons who are awaiting Housing Commission houses are accommodated at the Hole-in-One as a preparatory phase to their applying for a Commission house. The Hostel's management works closely with the Commission in this respect and uses some of its accommodation to enable Commission personnel to check up on the home management skills of prospective tenants.

Aboriginal Hostels also own some houses in which they offer shelter on a longer term basis to geriatrics and working men. In 1978, there were four houses in which a total of nineteen aged men and women (three of the houses were for women and one for men) could be housed. Each house is maintained by a housekeeper who also cooks for the residents.

By 1979, Aboriginal Hostels had increased its capacity by about 64 beds (Braddock 1979:21), a new hostel (the Sid Ross) having been built for Pitjatjantjara and the capacity of the aged persons' hostel having been increased to 35 beds. A further 48-bed hostel for aged persons was also under construction.

Theoretically, other hostels, hotels and motels in Alice Springs will also accommodate Aborigines who 'meet



their standards' but, because of a number of factors, few Aborigines stay there. Among these factors are higher charges than most Aborigines can afford and implicit inhibitions which deter most Aborigines (except the highly acculturated) from approaching certain kinds of premises in Alice Springs. One can be reasonably certain that, at least for the foreseeable future, there is little likelihood of Aborigines using the kind of accommodation which caters to tourist and predominantly European clientele.



## Chapter 6

### Improved shelter for town campers, 1960-74

Prior to the Land Rights legislation which recognized the needs of urban Aborigines for land, the Alice Springs town camp residents were illegal squatters on crown land with little prospect for improved living conditions. During a long period of expansion in Alice Springs, the conditions of the town camps did not change perceptibly. Town campers were in no position to initiate changes in their housing circumstances over the years, except, perhaps, to make minor improvements by using new materials as they became available on the garbage dumps in the construction of their humpies. Building conventional houses was unthinkable, as people neither had title to the land, money, materials nor skills. Nor, indeed, was it permitted because of the Ordinance forbidding the erection of any permanent utility on vacant crown land. Buying or even renting on the open market was equally impossible for the town campers as the costs were beyond their meagre means. As mentioned in the previous chapter, when camp residents occasionally attempted to obtain Housing Commission accommodation, they usually met with failure. In such circumstances, the only hope for change lay in the intervention of government agencies. There were no moves of this sort until the 1960s, and even these were miniscule compared to the extent of the problems. It is instructive to examine these moves, for they not only indicate the consuming lack of interest of government authorities for the plight of town campers, but they also suggest some lessons which should not pass unremarked.

The first attempt by an Aboriginal group to secure land in Alice Springs on which they could legitimately live was made in 1963. Seventeen Aboriginal artists (including six Namatjiras) approached local member of the Legislative Council, D.D. Smith, to assist them to secure the allotment of a piece of crown land in the Morris Soak area for their exclusive use. Smith wrote to the Administrator<sup>1</sup> in support

<sup>1</sup>D.D. Smith to Administrator, 26 June 1963.



of the application, pointing out that the group had been banned from camping at the Finke River Mission Block and that they did not want to stay at Amoonguna because they had nothing in common with the inmates there. As a result, they had to camp in the creek hard by Morris Soak. Smith concluded by referring to Section 122 of the Crown Lands Ordinance:

The Governor-General may grant to any aboriginal native, or the descendant of any aboriginal native, a lease of any Crown lands, not exceeding one hundred and sixty acres in area, for any term of years upon such terms and conditions as he thinks fit.

The group of artists also said that they would be prepared to contribute the greater proportion of finance required to build 'houses' on the land.

The Welfare Branch was not enthusiastic about the idea. The Branch was concerned that the seventeen artists were all married and had forty-eight children of school age.<sup>2</sup> The wives and children lived at Hermannsburg and the application made no mention of what the artists proposed to do with them. The Branch was also concerned that:

we should do everything in our power to prevent the re-establishment of a squalid camp site in the Morris Soak area; and that we control the numbers who settle there in the event of a lease being granted.

The Welfare Branch established that the artists and their families would comprise 88 people.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, the combined earnings of the group from paintings processed through the Welfare Branch, for the two years 1961-63, were £19,935.17.0 with one artist earning £4,697.12.0. These earnings were probably augmented by further 'illegal' sales made directly to customers.

The fact that such earning capacity would be enough to finance dwellings did not impress the Welfare Branch.

<sup>2</sup> Memo, Director to Assistant Director (Southern Division), 1 August 1963.

<sup>3</sup> Memo, G. Holden, Patrol Officer, to Assistant Director (S), 13 September 1963.

According to it, Morris Soak, before 1960, 'had an unsavoury reputation as a resort of no hopers and a place for drinking orgies'.<sup>4</sup> In 1959, the Centralian Pastoralist Association had complained that its cattle on the stock route were molested by dogs from the Morris Soak camp and, consequently, the Administrator directed that the inhabitants be removed to Ilparpa (the camp set up for sanitation department workers). The famous Aboriginal artist, Albert Namatjira, had camped some 3km to the west of Morris Soak and that camp also had a reputation for drinking parties at one of which in 1958 a 'lubra' had met a violent end.

Patrol Officer Holden concluded:<sup>5</sup>

Whilst I am sympathetic to the need of some of the artists for a permanent residence in Alice Springs I can see little advantage resulting from the granting of a lease at Morris Soak whilst disadvantages (from a community point of view) would be many. I consider that objections would come from various sources, particularly when the area was occupied. It is unlikely that the Animal Industry Board would support the application whilst objection could be expected from pastoralists who require the use of the stock route or Reserve as it could be expected that dogs would also be resident at the camp. Occupants of the Caravan Park would be likely to offer objection also, particularly if drinking parties occurred at the proposed camps.

In my opinion the granting of a lease to a group of aborigines should be discouraged. Facilities for overnight or short term accommodation are available at Amoonguna and alternatively for those artists who desire to remain permanently in Alice Springs their individual applications for houses already existing in the town area proper would receive sympathetic consideration.

An interesting insight into the bureaucratic mind is given by the response of the Assistant Director (Southern Division) to the surprising news of the earnings of the

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.



artists. He wrote:<sup>6</sup>

One obvious point that appears to have escaped notice all along the line is that none of them is paying taxation.

I feel that we should bring this to the notice of the Taxation Department before one of their inspectors discovers this.

The Assistant Director also supported his patrol officer's opposition to the camp:<sup>7</sup>

It is my opinion that this group is purely and simply trying to establish a camp in an out of the way neck of the woods where they can get on the grog and remain out of sight. It is high time that these people were made to accept some of their responsibilities, especially as regards their wives and children. The group is a source of annoyance to Hermannsburg Mission, as they come and go in taxis and broken down vehicles and make no contribution to the Mission whatsoever ...

The hygiene of these people also leaves a lot to be desired and the establishment of a camp in this area would immediately create hygiene problems. This is the reason, of course, that they are not allowed to camp at the Mission block any more. I feel we should oppose this application to the utmost of our ability as it will not be a help to the artists, nor will it help the township of Alice Springs.

The application was refused. The Administrator<sup>8</sup> cited the problems of the pastoralists with camp dogs in 1959 and the fact that no Aboriginal is ever prepared to accept full responsibility for the maintenance and general control of a camp and that the group made no provision for their wives and children in the application as reasons for declining the application. According to the Administrator, 'the task of introducing a programme of social change amongst such groups is virtually insuperable'. He therefore suggested that if

<sup>6</sup>Memo, Assistant Director Southern Division to Director, Welfare Branch, 18 September 1963.

<sup>7</sup>Memo, Assistant Director Southern Division to Director, Welfare Branch, 17 September 1963.

<sup>8</sup>Administrator to D.D. Smith, 18 October 1963.

members of the group did want to live in Alice Springs, those who could meet the financial and other requirements of the Housing Commission should apply to that authority for a home, while those who could not might be considered for accommodation in the transitional Gap cottage area. Somewhat inconsistently, the Administrator did not explain how this latter suggestion overcame his objection to the fact that members of the group would neglect their wives and children by living in Alice Springs. Nor did he explain what chances members of the group had in obtaining Housing Commission housing when social change was such an insuperable problem.

There was also opposition to the presence of town camps from the citizens of Alice Springs. Beginning in the early 1960s, there was growing public discussion of the appalling conditions in the town camps and calls were made for something to be done about them. The something that should be done was invariably negative, in the sense of seeking ways to remove them from the scene. There were letters to the editor of the *Centralian Advocate* and numerous complaints to the Town Management Board (now the Alice Springs Corporation). Not surprisingly, the complaints were made by white residents of the town. Although a few did express genuine concern for the plight of the town campers, most saw the camps and their occupants as unwanted problems, preferably to be removed somewhere else.

It is interesting that the outcry over the camps came when it did. Aborigines had been living in the vicinity of the town for decades (and, as noted earlier, they were in the majority when the town was first established and for some years after that). The concern appears to coincide with two significant changes in the life of the town in the 1960s:

- a. There was increasing visibility of Aborigines as restrictions on their movement were relaxed and their rights as Australians began to be recognized. This was especially after the adoption of a new Social Welfare Ordinance in 1964, which, among other things, made drinking legal for Aborigines.
- b. Tourism was beginning to be recognized as a major economic activity in Alice Springs. Many residents were concerned that the squalid conditions in the town camps would be detrimental to the image of the town presented to visitors.



In 1961, a Town Management Board (TMB) was established and, at its inaugural meeting, the question was raised of setting aside an area of land where itinerants might camp.<sup>9</sup> The concern of the TMB was to prevent indiscriminate camping along the Todd River and its central position to the town. By providing such a site, the TMB considered it would be able to prohibit illegal camping in the Todd. The Lands Branch was approached to recommend a location, but the area it suggested was not satisfactory because, in the opinion of the TMB, it was too close to the town and the land was subject to flooding.<sup>10</sup> In early 1962, a site was approved behind the Lutheran Mission facing the Todd River.<sup>11</sup> No action appears to have been taken over this site.

By 1963, the TMB had turned its attention to the question of how to evict 'campers and congregations of persons in the town area'.<sup>12</sup> It discovered that legislation did exist under the Crown Land Ordinance to deal with persons found camping on crown land<sup>13</sup> but it was cumbersome. The TMB therefore recommended that new legislation be introduced to prohibit persons camping on crown land within a three-mile radius of the township.<sup>14</sup>

The TMB sought other means to rid itself of the nuisance. It approached the medical authorities to see if they had any powers. The Health Department reported that with the Police it was doing its best to eliminate the problem, but the Department's action was restricted to persuasion rather than force.<sup>15</sup> Again, the TMB recommended that legislation be introduced to give the Health Department more powers and in 1964 received the news that the Department of Health had arranged for the Crown Law Officer to 'make' regulations under the Public Health Ordinance.<sup>16</sup>

In 1967, after receipt of a letter from Miss O.M. Pink, the focus of the TMB's attention changed yet again. In her

<sup>9</sup> Minute No.5, Inaugural meeting, 12 May 1961.

<sup>10</sup> Minute No.6, 4th meeting, 5 September 1961.

<sup>11</sup> Minute No.3, 7th meeting, 6 February 1962.

<sup>12</sup> Minute No.16, 17th meeting, 22 April 1963.

<sup>13</sup> Minute No.18, 18th meeting, 28 June 1963.

<sup>14</sup> Minute No.24, 27th meeting, 24 August 1964.

<sup>15</sup> Minute No.17, 26th meeting, 6 July 1964, and Minute No.14, 27th meeting, 28 August 1964.

<sup>16</sup> 28th meeting, 24 November 1964 - Report on outstanding matters 1961/64.

letter, Miss Pink complained that the natives were gradually killing the eucalypts in the Todd River by cutting roots to use for making artifacts. She also complained that the cooking of kangaroo meat (which she called a 'health hazard in itself') was a nuisance because 'soil-binding sticks and leaves were used on the fires'. On the strength of this letter, the TMB resolved that legislation should be prepared to prevent the lighting of fires in the river beds of the Todd and Charles rivers between the Telegraph Station National Park and Heavitree Gap up to 200 yards of the bank.<sup>17</sup> The legislation, though drafting was begun, was not forthcoming<sup>18</sup> and the TMB was advised that all that was necessary was for the Timber and Forestry Bureau to erect signs stating that fires were banned in this area.<sup>19</sup> No one, however, explained to the TMB how non-literate Aborigines were expected to read and comprehend these notices.

In May 1967, the TMB found a new hope. It was informed that a special sub-committee had been formed in Darwin to investigate the problems of camping Aborigines in various centres of the Northern Territory.<sup>20</sup> It promptly invited the sub-committee to visit Alice Springs. The sub-committee neither visited Alice Springs nor produced a report and the next the TMB heard was that it was defunct and that a Select Committee of the NT Legislative Council had been established to report on Aboriginal integration.

The TMB's response was to appoint its own sub-committee, which reported in September 1970.<sup>21</sup> The sub-committee summarized the main objections of the community to campers:

- a. Noise, associated with bad behaviour;
- b. the fear of health hazards arising out of the scattering of rubbish and the absence of sanitary conveniences for the campers;
- c. child welfare and education;
- d. the possibility of danger to people arising out of drunkenness and offensive behaviour;

<sup>17</sup>Minute No.18, 33rd meeting, 6 September 1965.

<sup>18</sup>Minute No.7, 36th meeting, 21 March 1966, and Minute No.6 37th meeting, 23 May 1966.

<sup>19</sup>Minute No.6, 37th meeting, 23 May 1966.

<sup>20</sup>Minute No.13, 45th meeting, 11 May 1967.

<sup>21</sup>Alice Springs Town Management Board Camping sub-committee report and recommendations, 1970 (mimeo).



e. the untidiness of the immediate environs of the main town area;

f. the impairment of the tourist image of the town.

Surprisingly, the committee found few permanent campers, estimating this population at 60 to 100 with a transient population of between 30 and 350. The committee did, however, acknowledge that the figure could be higher.

The report took a reasonably constructive view of the situation of the town camps. It recommended that five camping sites be set aside and that the sites be equipped with 'reasonable facilities'. Responsible Aboriginal groups, however, had to make their wishes known to the TMB and it seemed to be assumed that these representations would be made through members of the white community in whom the Aborigines placed some trust.

The committee, however, did appear to try to hedge its bets. It suggested that no permanent improvements be made in the first instance, and where facilities were required they should be portable ones. In the event of failure, such facilities could be moved elsewhere. It also recommended that, should the necessary sites be set up, camping should be banned from the town area after six months, which seemed to suggest that the committee might have been concerned that its cautious proposals might be found wanting by Aborigines, despite the fact that the five sites were in recognition of the tribal differences of Aborigines living or visiting Alice Springs and that the main tribal groups represented in the town were the Aranda, Pitjatjantjara, Warlpiri, Anmatjira and Pintubi.

So after nine years and without once consulting any Aborigines, the TMB came to recognize that the problem of Aborigines using Alice Springs and wanting to remain there either permanently or for short stays would not simply go away and could not be banished without considerable difficulty. The recommendations of the sub-committee seemed to be a genuine attempt to provide the Aborigines with some facilities, though it was quite clear that the TMB never meant the Aborigines to have control over these camps. For example, in 1970, Mr Martin of the TMB indicated to a meeting that the 'Administration would have to retain the ultimate

right to close an area!'.<sup>22</sup> For him, a lease direct to the people might not be the answer.

There was a number of people concerned about developments in Alice Springs and not all of them lived in the township. The authoritative Commonwealth Council for Aboriginal Affairs, for example, considered that the Alice Springs community was 'one of the most explosive' in Australia. Pressure therefore mounted on the authorities to do something about the situation of the town campers in the township.

The TMB's report was submitted to the Social Welfare Department in Darwin in October 1970. Despite several appeals from interested persons, no action was taken until November 1971, when the Director of the Department called a meeting in Alice Springs. (Some town campers attended this meeting.) At this meeting, the Director announced that the Welfare Department would provide funds for a site chosen by the TMB (a site on the west side of the Charles River) and that other groups had three weeks in which to submit plans and budgets for other sites if they wished to be funded for the following financial year. This precipitate announcement caught the town campers and their supporters unprepared. Only one such plan was submitted, by the Cross-culture group, which had been actively considering means of developing a camp for almost two years and was therefore sufficiently prepared with enough facts and figures to meet the deadline.

Interestingly the Welfare Department's action was taken shortly after the Council for Aboriginal Affairs had expressed to Cabinet its disappointment with the Aboriginal programs implemented through the Department of the Interior and the NTA. One of the Council's specific recommendations<sup>24</sup> was the provision of adequate camping facilities for Aboriginal visitors to Alice Springs.

Thus two sites were approved for funding - Charles River and the Little Sisters (Cross-culture) camp. According to the *Centralian Advocate* (12 April 1973), \$76,660 was

<sup>22</sup>Descriptive minutes of a specially convened meeting held on 14 June 1970 in Griffiths House.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>B.G.Dexter to Minister for consideration - Budget Cabinet: NT Programme, July 1971.



granted to the Charles River project; \$47,000 was granted the Cross-culture group.<sup>25</sup> The first point to note is that both these development projects were initiated and undertaken by whites, the former at an official level and the latter by a group of interested private individuals. Neither appears to have been successful but, in each case, the reasons were different. In short, the Charles River project did not involve Aborigines either in the planning or development stage and sought to fill a need perceived by whites, which, it is likely, was not of the utmost priority to camp residents. The Cross-culture project had goodwill and sought to involve the Aborigines in the planning and development stages. The group, however, lacked the necessary resources to implement its plans and see them to completion.

#### The Charles River village

At the recommendation of the TMB, the Social Welfare Department of the NTA (whose jurisdiction over Aborigines was assumed by the DAA in 1973) obtained a lease for a site on the edge of the Charles River on vacant crown land. The choice of this site is a curious one, since it is on the side of the river away from the town. It is out of sight of the road. In times of flood, it is completely cut off. The original purpose of the camp was to provide short-term accommodation for traditionally-oriented Aborigines. A local firm of architects was engaged to design structures for the site. Sewerage, water and electricity were connected. Five small concrete block houses were built. Four of them had one room with a large wood burning stove located in the centre, a shower room, windows with shutter but no glass and no verandahs. The fifth was substantially the same but had two rooms. An ablution block with toilet, showers and laundry was also built. In addition pipe frames fixed on concrete slabs, over which tarpaulins or other material could be slung to make a kind of tent, and taps and barbecue fireplaces were situated at several points on the site. Building was completed in 1973. At that time, according to Patrol Officer B.Horne, the Aboriginal group living there (12 males, 12 females and 24 children) had never been through the dwellings, had not been consulted about the planning or functioning of the project nor about how it was to be managed. For Horne, the design of the project had been based on three false premises:

<sup>25</sup> Minutes of meeting (n.d.) at Institute for Aboriginal Development re accommodation and planning, Alice Springs.

that the community was transient, it was not; that its housing needs were simple and unsophisticated, they were not; that the group was a Walbiri one, it was Anmatjira.<sup>26</sup>

It is instructive to examine the course of events at Charles River subsequent to the establishment of the camp. As soon as the site was ready, a group of Aborigines (two extended families) who had been camping at a spot further along the Charles River promptly moved into the houses. Both families were permanent Alice Springs residents - one had been living at Amoonguna for about three years before moving to Charles River.

Management of the village was left vague and it is still difficult to ascertain who, if anyone, was responsible for maintenance, rubbish collection and other management tasks. Certainly the DAA was concerned that unless someone became responsible for the management of the camp, it would become a 'shambles'. An officer was assigned to see to the setting up of a management committee.<sup>27</sup> On 18 December 1973, the community appointed a long-time resident, Lindsay Turner, as manager. It also agreed to a committee consisting of four residents, 'several representatives' of the Catholic Church, one town councillor and one DAA representative to provide 'oversight' and guidance to the operation of the area.<sup>28</sup> It appeared to be a somewhat bureaucratic solution to management problems.

The duties of the manager were never clearly defined and it is not certain that the proposed management committee ever met. The manager achieved some official status with the DAA and was paid to keep the camp area clean. A vehicle was purchased for his use in carrying out these duties. When he failed to do so and the vehicle fell into disrepair, conflict arose between the two families. Eventually, in 1975, one family moved out and returned to camp along the river bank. Four other families, all newcomers to Alice

<sup>26</sup>Patrol Officer B.Horne to Director, DAA, Northern Territory Division, 7 September 1973. For confirmation that the camp was regarded as Warlpiri, see press statement of the Minister for the Interior, 28 March 1972.

<sup>27</sup>Assistant Director (Operations) to Director DAA, NT Division, 13 September 1973.

<sup>28</sup>Acting Regional Adviser (Alice Springs) to Director DAA, NT Division, 19 December 1973.



Springs from places as far afield as Darwin, promptly moved into the four small houses, leaving twenty-five people camping around the house of the original family.

One thing can be established with certainty. The village has never housed the category of people for whom it was intended - that is to say, temporary visitors to Alice Springs.

It was perhaps unfortunate that the development stage of the project was completed just as the DAA was becoming established in Alice Springs. It is, however, curious to know how it was intended that five concrete block houses would cater for the transient Warlpiri visitors to Alice Springs without there being any formal management of the place. Such an approach does not even work for whites: all motels and camping sites having to employ people to manage, maintain and clean the facilities. Although two men were eventually employed on the site (and they were Anmatjira), their responsibilities were never clearly defined, nor, indeed, was it clearly indicated that the facilities were not being provided for the people who, for many years, had been camping in the area, but for temporary visitors to Alice Springs. With such lack of clarity and in the absence of any planning for the kinds of social support which appear to be critical to the success of such a venture, it is not surprising that total confusion reigned at Charles River, a situation which, within two years, led to disunity in a formerly united group and eventually to the destruction of the group itself.

It must also be stated that from the outset there was considerable objection to the shelters offered at the Charles River camp. Criticism came from Aborigines and whites. Many Aborigines refused to consider living at Charles River; some objected to its location as being too far from the town centre and questioned whether the aim was to keep them hidden. Some referred to the houses as 'dog boxes'. Certainly, they were not only unsuited to the Alice Springs climate but also totally unsuited to the traditionally oriented Aboriginal way of life, for which they were ostensibly designed.

The experiences associated with the Charles River camp serve to demonstrate some of the consequences of inadequate planning and groundwork in so delicate an area as the provision of housing for a traditionally oriented Aboriginal group. The project was a totally official and white inspired one. No Aboriginal people were consulted in the choice of

a site or the location and design of the dwellings. Once the camping facilities were completed, there was no careful development of some kind of Aboriginal committee or agency to supervise the occupancy of the buildings and to ensure proper management of the site. Even after there was official realization that some kind of management would be required, there was no concerted action by the DAA which had inherited responsibility for town camps.<sup>29</sup> Instead, the residents were left to the tender mercies of a number of government departments, each acting independently of the other, and some voluntary organizations, all of which simply added to the confusion in the minds of the inhabitants. The only decisive actions which were taken concerned the Toyota truck owned by the community. The first was the decision to buy one for the community. The second was that, as the people of Charles River no longer functioned as a community (December 1975), the truck would be of nuisance value and likely to cause ill-feeling between individual families. Tenders were therefore sought by the DAA from other communities to purchase the truck.<sup>30</sup>

#### The Little Sisters (Cross-culture) camp

The Little Sisters camp was funded largely because an Alice Springs Cross-culture group had been established in October 1969 to begin the development of a site for the Pitjatjantjara living there. The group was formed by members of the United Church with the goal of fostering understanding and good relations between white and black residents of the town. Almost immediately the group opened its membership to include interested individuals from other churches and throughout the community. Various informal social events were organized at which Aborigines and whites could get together. Monthly meetings of the group were also held.

<sup>29</sup>In defence of the DAA it must be admitted that its swift acquisition of responsibilities for Aboriginal affairs in the Northern Territory brought with it a grossly understaffed Alice Springs office, most of the officers in which had been members of the discredited Welfare Branch of the NTA. It was not until the local office received an injection of new staff in 1974-75 that it began to perform satisfactorily.

<sup>30</sup>DAA internal memo, 23 December 1975.



Soon after its formation, the Cross-culture group began to discuss the poor conditions under which Aboriginal residents in and visitors to Alice Springs had to camp. A survey of the facilities available to Aborigines in the town and of the town camps themselves was carried out and an assessment of needs made. From this survey, the group determined that there was an urgent need for ablution and toilet facilities for Aborigines not living in conventional housing. These views were presented to the TMB, the local member of the Legislative Council and others. The pleas for urgent action, however, failed.

The Cross-culture group took a particular interest in the TMB sub-committee's investigation of town camps in 1970 and supported its recommendations. At about the same time, through the Reverend Jim Downing and the United Church who already had a close association with the Pitjatjantjara, the group decided to work with some Pitjatjantjara from Hermannsburg and Maryvale who were camping on vacant crown land next to the novitiate house of the Little Sisters. The group began consultation with the affected fringe campers and communities from which visitors came to try to determine what kind of camping facilities they might require. Thus, when the Director of Social Welfare did call for plans in November 1971, the Cross-culture group was able to move quickly.

The plan submitted by the Cross-culture group proposed to establish ablution blocks and houses for permanent residents and for visitors, camping areas with water and power points and an additional ablution block serving these areas. Because the Little Sisters' camp had a reputation as the scene of much drinking, some of the prospective temporary campers asked that the visitors' area be separated from the permanent area by a high fence and that a caretaker be provided. This provision was included in the plans. Since the camp was situated on Aranda land, the Pitjatjantjara felt they should secure Aranda permission before any building took place on the site. This was done at a meeting of representatives of the two groups and of the Cross-culture group. A lease for 20 acres of land was agreed to in principle in May 1972<sup>31</sup> and a grant of \$47,000 was obtained from the government to erect toilet, ablution and other facilities and a caretaker's residence. In October 1972,

<sup>31</sup> *Darwin News*, 13 March 1973.

when the group submitted its building plans, it found that the land was zoned as parkland and therefore had to be rezoned. By March 1973, the rezoning plans were being displayed for the statutory 3-month period.

In retrospect the Cross-culture plans seem sensible, but for what was planned, however, the government grant was paltry. It was quite insufficient to start and continue a development program in accordance with the local residents' wishes. A compromise had to be effected and what resulted was unsatisfactory for everyone. It was decided initially to build two ablution blocks and reticulate water and electricity to them. The building of these exhausted the initial grant. No further funds were made available, the project ground to a halt and the residents, after the promise of permanent houses, believed that they had been duped by the government. An attempt and opportunity to provide satisfactory accommodation and facilities at a town camp under sympathetic management had been lost, a close and apparently harmonious working relationship between Europeans and Aborigines was allowed to disintegrate and the residents of Little Sisters gained very little from the exercise.



## Chapter 7

### Land rights for town campers

The current activity in the area of securing land rights for Aborigines in the Northern Territory may obscure the fact that until 1973 there was no recognition that Aborigines had any formal rights to land based on traditional ownership. Until then traditionally oriented Aborigines had been in the position of living on reserves owned by the government, or on stations leased to white pastoralists or on missions like Hermannsburg which had obtained special purpose leases to an area of land, or in towns as squatters, renters and rarely, if ever, as home owners.

There was a fundamental difference between the Aborigines' view and use of land and that of the whites. The Europeans had a utilitarian approach which had become a kind of religio-economic dogma permitting them to deny that Aborigines had any rights to the land because they did not put it to economic use like grazing or agriculture. The whites felt no compunction about taking over vast areas of land from the original inhabitants. Gradually, all over the continent, whites took the best land and used it for farming and grazing. These enterprises were given priority with little attention to Aboriginal needs and wishes. Not only was the land taken but the Aborigines were summarily confined to small reserves which were usually on land which had little commercial value (that is, unsuitable for farming; some of that land has since been found to have valuable mineral deposits and again there is much talk of reducing what rights have been granted to Aborigines in the Northern Territory). Even these reserves remained government owned in most places until 1966 when the South Australian government transferred ownership of some of the reserves to an Aboriginal Lands Trust. The State government, however, did not transfer the north-west reserve, where Pitjatjantjara live, into Aboriginal ownership.

In 1973 (in an effort to fulfil campaign promises to Aborigines) the newly elected Commonwealth Labor Government

took steps in the direction of redressing the historical injustices which had deprived Aborigines of any rights to land. Commonwealth jurisdiction over the Northern Territory made it possible for measures to be taken towards legal recognition of land rights there. The government appointed Justice A.E. Woodward as Commissioner to make an inquiry and submit recommendations as to how the goal of restoration could be achieved. The Commissioner made extensive investigations in the Territory regarding traditional Aboriginal links with the land, white claims upon vast areas of land, etc. He published his findings and recommendations in two reports (Woodward 1973, 1974). In these, he set guidelines for the process by which traditional Aboriginal owners should go about securing legal title over their land.

The Land Rights Commission report (and the resulting Land Rights Bill which was introduced into parliament in 1975, lapsed with the fall of the Whitlam government, and was reintroduced with amendments in 1976) were of enormous significance to the Aborigines of the Territory, as they represented a radical change in official attitudes to Aborigines as citizens and to their traditional links with the land. It is important to note, however, that the changes were made within a fairly limited range in that the land over which Aborigines were to be permitted to establish claims based on traditional ownership had to be unalienated crown land or land which had been purchased by or on behalf of traditional Aboriginal groups. The Commissioner was at pains to exclude all land which was already leased by pastoralists and others. This effectively meant that much of the land which could be claimed by Aborigines, although large in area, is of marginal economic value, except where valuable minerals might exist.

The Commissioner also made provision for Aborigines resident in urban areas. In his first report, Judge Woodward recommended the establishment of Land Councils to represent and act in the interests of Northern Territory Aborigines in matters related to land. This resulted in two such bodies being set up: the Northern Land Council and the Central Land Council. In his second report the Commissioner recommended that urban Aborigines who were unable to seek land on the basis of traditional ownership should be able to seek land on the basis of need. This would be done by applying for leases in perpetuity of vacant crown land. The Land Council's functions would thus include:



Investigating and reporting on the land requirements of Aborigines in towns, [and] coordinating and making claims to vacant Crown lands (Woodward 1974).

This recommendation was of crucial importance to the Alice Springs town campers. If accepted, it assured them of access to land even though they might not be living in a place with which they had traditional links. On the other hand, it precluded traditional owners such as some of the Aranda in Alice Springs from making claims on the basis of traditional ownership as the land lay within the boundaries of a township.

The government prepared a Land Rights Bill based on Commissioner Woodward's recommendations and submitted it to Parliament in October 1975. An interim Land Commissioner, Mr Justice Ward, was appointed while the preparation and processing of the Bill was in progress. In the same month, Justice Ward began to hear submissions from Aborigines in the Territory attempting to establish claims. These claims included 'town claims' in Alice Springs. Before the Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Bill was passed by Parliament, the Labor government was replaced by a caretaker Liberal/Country Party government under the leadership of Malcolm Fraser. Pending new elections, the Bill lapsed, the interim Land Commissioner was withdrawn and land hearings were terminated. At that point, the Alice Springs town claims had appeared to be well on the way to being granted.

In 1976, the new Liberal-Country Party government introduced an amended Bill, which was proclaimed in January 1977. For the town campers, the most significant changes were that they could no longer be represented by Land Councils and that their applications for land had to be submitted to the Northern Territory Lands Board rather than the Land Commissioner. The government thus separated claims based on need from those based on traditional ownership and placed the former in the same category as applications for land by members of the general public.

The process to acquire a grant of land could be protracted. In accordance with the Act, lease applications for Alice Springs town campers, until the granting of limited state rights to the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly in 1978, were prepared by the DAA in consultation with the Department of the Northern Territory (DONT). The application was then submitted to the DONT Lands Board (now the Town Planning Board) along with development plans and drawings

to comply with covenant requirements. Then the application was advertised and anyone wishing to contest it had three months in which to do so. If there were no objections, the application was submitted to the Northern Territory Town Planning Board. If approved by the Board, it then went to the NT Administrator for his ratification and finally to the Minister for the Northern Territory to be signed.<sup>1</sup>

This procedure raises the vexed question of the advisability of having government departments working with each other on behalf of a disadvantaged group. The role of DONT in matters related to leasehold applications by Alice Springs Aborigines (as will be described later in this chapter) strongly suggests that there may be a conflict, if not outright obstruction, on the Department's part and yet it is partly responsible for processing an application on behalf of an Aboriginal group. Where there might be a conflict of interest between government department and Aboriginal client but where the Aboriginal client is totally dependent on the government for funding, it would seem preferable for Aboriginal interests to be represented by their appointed representatives or, where necessary, by statutory bodies working on their behalf. Public servants, whether in DAA or other departments, are answerable to their superiors and ultimately to their ministers and the elected government, rather than to those who are most affected by their policies and actions. With government departments working with each other, there is little recourse for the Aboriginal people if they are poorly served, especially if their interest impinges on some political field, as most aspects of Aboriginal affairs do.

These comments raise an important issue which can only be briefly discussed in this monograph. The issue concerns the ability of a department radically to change the entrenched attitudes of officers to reflect changes in public opinion or abrupt changes in the policies of government. By its very nature, the public service tends to produce officers of a conservative disposition. Often, despite policy changes of government, attitudes towards certain major issues change only slowly. In the Northern Territory, Aborigines are one such issue. Both the DAA and DONT offices in the Northern

<sup>1</sup>Presently the Town Planning Board makes recommendations to the Executive Council. The applicants have a right to appeal to a tribunal chaired by a Queens Council about legal questions about the ordinance and the interpretation by the Board of it.



Territory, upon their establishment in early 1973, were staffed predominantly by officers of the Northern Territory Administration, in fact the very officers whose approach to the town camp problem in Alice Springs has already been depicted in previous chapters of this monograph. To reinforce my point that the attitudes of the public servants concerned were often bordering on the racist, it might well be useful to quote at length the opinion of a Welfare Branch district welfare officer, contained in a letter he wrote to his director which, presumably, he confidently expected would be well received:<sup>2</sup>

...4. I am not at all happy about the attitudes I see developing among Aborigines on settlements in the Giles District. Many Aborigines are becoming independent and demanding and seem to be losing any respect for authority. It is certainly dangerous to reproach an Aborigine in a firm manner and for this reason many settlement staff adopt a permissive and casual attitude towards this behaviour and the supervision of work habits.

5. It is a fact that we have large groups of Aborigines on settlements who are generally ignorant and at the most half educated. Many have gained a false sense of importance, mostly evident from teenage to the mid 30s, because of outside influences. These influences are also exerted occasionally by members of staff who have some unusual ideas about Aboriginal advancement.

6. I also believe that there is far too much emphasis given to the importance of Aborigines attending meetings and conferences. It is certainly good to get them involved, but they should be qualified for this involvement. There are too many instances of people who do not understand or misunderstand attending conferences and returning to their home situations and talking a lot of unbelievable rot. Of course, a serious situation could result when such delegates come into contact with well known 'stirrers' [this appeared to be a reference to Dr H.C. Coombs, the chairman of the Commonwealth Council for Aboriginal Affairs and former Governor

<sup>2</sup>District Welfare Officer to Assistant Director, Welfare Branch, 18 November 1969 - Independence movement - Haasts Bluff reserve.

of the Federal Reserve Bank] when they attend such conferences. Unfortunately, it is a Welfare Branch officer who does all the hard work, who must contend with unsatisfactory behaviour and poor attitudes.

7. In the field of Aboriginal advancement, there are many little things that we need to concentrate on before any real advancement can be acknowledged and these are very insignificant and ordinary such as working for 8 hours a day, adequately looking after one's children, not spending all of one's money on wine and unessentials, developing good personal hygiene, living in houses, and many thousands of other features of life normally expected in a sound community of people. Unfortunately, there are too many idle people incurring Aboriginal problems, both black and white, and not wishing to do any work. I only hope we are not 'creating a monster'.

The letter was well received. So well in fact that it was passed from the NTA to the Commonwealth Department of the Interior in Canberra where it found its way up to the desk of the Deputy Secretary who passed it approvingly to the Council for Aboriginal Affairs as an example of what Aborigines were like in the Northern Territory.

These attitudes are confirmed by Tatz (1965:42):

The predominant attitude - more evident perhaps in Canberra than in the Branch itself - is the approach to Aborigines as a mass, a race, 'so many wards'. For many Branch officers Aborigines have formed a stereotype, people with a common set of characteristics, many of them negative: 'they' cannot handle liquor, 'they' lack responsibility, are apathetic, are incapable of learning elementary personal hygiene and so on.

... Their [welfare officers] administration is characterised by a tendency to paternalism and to domination in the absence of articulate resistance to instructions, ideas and methods of change. It is common to see officers adopt their 'Aboriginal' attitudes when dealing with others, and this does cause a real resentment in the non-Aboriginal clientele. (It also causes resentment in Aborigines, usually expressed in overt physical resistance, but this is very often rationalised in terms of a facet



of the stereotype.) It is a curious fact that while there is substance to this criticism of the Welfare Branch, nowhere has there been any suggestion that the Branch should insist on a higher standard of treatment and service for Aborigines, except perhaps the recent instruction from the Director to his officers to avoid using the words 'boy', 'lubra' and 'pic'.

The changes wrought by the Whitlam administration on the DAA and DONT (or at least the officers each inherited) were noticeably different. Admittedly, the first Labor Minister for the Northern Territory, Dr Rex Patterson, was a man who appeared to possess attitudes not greatly dissimilar to those of his predecessors, the Country Party Ministers for the Interior, Peter Nixon and Ralph Hunt. Certainly, his public comments about Aborigines seemed more concerned to emphasize white interests than corresponding Aboriginal ones. For example, his statement on black/white violence in the Northern Territory did not reveal a man well disposed to Aborigines:<sup>3</sup>

Central to the overall problem ... was the availability of relatively large sums of money which just could not be handled by many outback Aborigines. The major beneficiaries were the sellers of hard liquor. Aborigines were being told by stirrers that they need never work again for whites and that all the land in the north would eventually belong to them.

Given the attitudes of its first Minister, it is hardly surprising that the attitudes of public servants within DONT remained, at best, indifferent to Aboriginal interests.

In contrast, the DAA, at least for the first few years of its existence, was infused with the reforming zeal of the Council for Aboriginal Affairs and its research arm, the Office of Aboriginal Affairs. The attitudes towards Aborigines of senior officers in the Department led by the permanent secretary B.G. Dexter, were significantly different from those possessed by the officers the department inherited who staffed the regional office in Darwin and the area office in Alice Springs.

<sup>3</sup>Sydney Morning Herald, 16 January 1974.

Between 1973 and 1975 the Alice Springs office gave the head office of the department considerable cause for concern. It had a low public service rating and consequently was staffed by junior officers, most of whom were men of modest abilities. Most of them found it difficult to shake off the attitudes they had formed while working for the Welfare Branch. Chapter 2 has already noted that the Department conducted an internal investigation into allegations of racism being practised by officers within the office.

For the Department, the problem of the Alice Springs office was serious because of its opinion of the town's importance as a centre for all Centralian Aborigines as well as the 1000 or so Aborigines resident there.<sup>4</sup> It is perhaps worth reiterating Dexter's opinion (noted in the introduction) that the Aboriginal situation in Alice Springs was one of the most difficult the Department had to deal with.

In 1975, this problem was partly resolved by the Alice Springs office being upgraded to be headed by a Class 10 officer. Dexter was able to appoint an officer of his choice, R. Huey, who had been with the Office of Aboriginal Affairs from its early days. For the town campers of Alice Springs, this appointment was appropriate, for Huey brought with him a determination to resolve the issues facing the town campers, a conviction of the rightness of their cause<sup>5</sup> as well as a willingness to take action both within the bureaucracy and in the public arena to advance their cause. Huey, from the outset, recognized the existence of separate viable communities living in the town camps and the importance of obtaining some security of tenure to the land on which they camped before any development could be contemplated. He also recognized the central importance of housing for the town campers without having any fixed ideas about how it should be delivered. The lack of rigidity in his thinking was perhaps Huey's greatest attribute for it allowed him to give

<sup>4</sup>Undated report by I.S.Mitchell - Alice Springs (probably at beginning of November 1974).

<sup>5</sup>For example, in March 1975, after Cabinet had agreed to the development of residential land on the east side of Alice Springs and before his appointment to the area office, Huey wrote (Huey to Mr McKenzie, 14 March 1975 - Land for fringe camps): 'To proceed to implement a new town plan for Alice Springs in the face of long standing, unmet land requirements for at least 15 separate Aboriginal groups is to me unthinkable in 1975.'



the town campers time to develop their own solutions to their problems out of which grew the Tangatjira Council, the town campers' answer to their own management and organizational problems, which will be discussed in Chapter 11. Huey's approach was probably a reflection of Dexter's, which in part can be illustrated by a note he wrote for the Minister en route to Alice Springs (2 March 1975):

DAA cannot solve the problems of Alice Springs. The citizens, non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal, must do this. But we can come in with the material resources needed to implement agreed programs.

When discussing the activities of public service departments in the social field, it is important to consider the activities of individual officers like Huey, for they have enormous power to influence situations both positively and negatively. This influence can be of a different order from the impact of a government's policies or the programs it develops. Alice Springs is an excellent case in point. Huey was undoubtedly successful and played a very important role in the transformation of the situation of the town campers and in helping to defuse a potentially explosive situation to change it to one of the few conspicuously successful programs of the DAA (a role which does not appear to have been recognized by the Department). In 1979, Huey returned to take up a position in Canberra. The choice of his successor among other things revealed the changes which had occurred in the Department after D.O. Hay succeeded Dexter as permanent head. In short, good administration became the principal objective of the Department rather than good development. Hay demonstrated his poor grasp of the fragile stage of Aboriginal development in Central Australia by appointing a person to succeed Huey who had had no experience of social development nor any experience of traditionally oriented Aborigines except as they were administered from Canberra, and whose strengths appeared to lie strictly in the field of administration.

These comments in no way imply that government departments cannot act as advocates for some cause such as Aboriginal betterment, nor do they presume that the government departments always act in harness. In the case of the latter, there is the example of the running battle between the Department of the Interior and the Council and Office of Aboriginal Affairs between 1968 and 1972, especially over the granting of some recognition that Aborigines had

traditional rights to land and over the acquisition of pastoral properties for Aboriginal groups in the Northern Territory. In Alice Springs, this opposition continued over the granting of leases to town camps with the DAA playing an important role to expedite the process.

\* The point I want to make is not that government departments are poor or unlikely advocates of causes, but that, in a changing political environment and with officers of differing abilities and attitudes holding key and influential posts, departments cannot always be expected to practise the kinds of advocacy necessarily required by their clients. In some cases such advocacy can put an officer's job and promotion prospects on the line. That is why, in the first instance, it is better for Aborigines to employ people or organizations which are answerable to them. The services of government departments can still be utilized to support the claims whenever the political climate and the officers concerned are sympathetic. This is precisely the arrangement which eventually led to the granting of leases to town camps in Alice Springs during the period 1975-78. Initially the Central Land Council and then the Aboriginal Housing Panel assisted each town camp to prepare, present and expedite its leasehold application and, in these endeavours, the town camps were greatly assisted by the DAA which practised its own brand of advocacy at interdepartmental and ministerial level.

The ensuing situation whereby the DAA and DONT became solely responsible for processing a leasehold application was a radical change potentially to the disadvantage of Aborigines. In the former situation, if the DAA proved unhelpful, the organization employed by the Aborigines could assist them to explore different channels. If the organizations themselves proved unsatisfactory, they could be changed. The current situation (the DAA now works with the NT Town Planning Board) gives the Aborigines no alternative but a government department. If it proves unsatisfactory, Aborigines do not possess the funds to turn to any other organization with the skills and expertise to assist them to pursue their claim.

The experience of some town camps in the obtaining of a lease to land exemplifies the potential problems Aborigines can have with less than helpful departments. The processing of a leasehold application can be lengthy and complicated and requires professional assistance and support of the utmost integrity. It is inconceivable that town campers would, without assistance, have been able successfully to



make and pursue an application. The Ntapa application is a case in point. Application for a lease was first made to the Secretary of DONT in November 1973 and acknowledged the following month. After one reminder, DONT advised that the current lease for the land did not expire until June 1975, that the Urban Development and Town Planning Branch was investigating the future use of the land and that, until the lease expired, no final decision in relation to the future use could be considered.

In March 1974, application was therefore made for a lease of the land then occupied by the community hard by the Alice Springs sewage ponds at Ilparpa. In April, in reply to a request from DONT, preliminary requirements for the lease were forwarded to the Department. In May and June 1974, reminders were sent to DONT that a reply would be appreciated. In July, DONT requested further information in relation to the lease.

In April 1975, the community reopened its application for the first lease because it was realized how unsatisfactory was the location beside the sewage ponds and because DONT did not seem to be able to process the second application any more expeditiously than the first. Preliminary development plans and other information were sent to DONT in furtherance of this application. In May 1975, the Urban Development and Town Planning Branch of DONT sought justification for the amount of land applied for in relation to the size of the proposed development, a reply being sent immediately by Ntapa. In October 1975, DONT advised that part of the original lease had been set aside for the community, but that the matter had to go on public exhibition.

At about the same time, in order to reinforce the existing application, a supporting parallel application for a leasehold grant was made to the Interim Land Commissioner. The fact that this application was intended to reinforce the existing application was acknowledged by DONT at the Land Commission hearing:<sup>6</sup>

Your Honour, I do not see there is any problem with your making a recommendation to Government on recognising the claim area, it would only supplement and re-enforce the processes which the

<sup>6</sup>Transcript of a hearing before Commissioner Ward in November 1975 (Central Land Council, Alice Springs).

Department is proceeding with. And I feel that the sooner the processes have gone through, the better for the applicant and claimant for the land.

In due course, the change of zoning was gazetted and the public display period expired in February 1976. The further application, however, did not appear to 'supplement and re-enforce the processes which the Department was proceeding with'. Instead, the Town Planning Board did not consider the granting of the lease because of an apparent 'misapprehension' on the part of the Board that the Administrator's Counsel would not consider any Town Planning Board recommendation in respect of an application for a lease where there was a concurrent land claim. At a subsequent meeting between DONT and Ntapa, DONT confirmed the 'misapprehension'.

At this meeting, DONT was also advised that part of the lease might have to be used for road access purposes and the leased area might be slightly different from that applied for. DONT advised that the question of access did not present a great problem and that the proposal would certainly not have to go back on public display if an area slightly different from that originally applied for was to be granted.

By March 1976, the 'misapprehension' over the twin lease applications seemed to have been cleared up. In April 1976, contact was made with DONT about granting the lease, but the community was advised that until the question of access was resolved, no lease could be granted. It was also advised that, if there were any changes to the original lease, the application would have to go on public display again for a further period of three months. Representations then were made to local politicians and eventually in March 1977 a lease was granted to the Ntapa community.

Had the Ntapa community only been assisted by officers of the DAA and DONT, there must remain a residual doubt that the lease application would have proceeded to a satisfactory conclusion. In this case, Ntapa had the services of a private firm of solicitors, the Central Land Council and the Aboriginal Housing Panel, to assist it with its application. It was largely through the perseverance of these bodies on behalf of the community that, after three years, 149 items of correspondence and numerous meetings, telephone calls and telexes, approval was finally granted.



The Ntapa lease application has been the most time-consuming to date. Other applications have also not been without a number of difficulties (for example, the Heavitree (Larapinta) application was the subject of serious objections from the Town Planning and Urban Development Branch, as the area was considered by planners to be suitable for a future subdivision). *other were?*

One matter which should be argued strongly and should be manifest from the discussion about town camps in previous chapters, is the likelihood that more 'permanent' town camps will form in the future as more Aborigines move to Alice Springs in search of employment and the kinds of other amenities which have always attracted them to the town. These camps will form for the same social reasons that town camps have formed in the past, and in particular because they provide the kind of social ambience that most tribally oriented Aborigines are accustomed to and therefore seek. Undoubtedly, the 'transient' camps will also continue for the foreseeable future, but it is those which take on permanent characteristics which will be seeking grants of land on which to undertake their own developments. It would therefore be unwise, and socially most regressive, for the Northern Territory government to presume that, once the present set of leasehold applications has been processed, it can close its books on leasehold grants for town camps in Alice Springs.

A second equally important matter is the ability of town camps physically to expand as vacant areas of land on their leases are exhausted (see Appendix II for details of potential extent of expansion of town camps already granted leases). Mt Nancy might be used as a hypothetical case in point. At the moment, Mt Nancy has been granted a 4.25 hectare lot, on which have been built eight houses and a toilet block. Given the topography of the lot (a rocky hill on the lot, for example, could not be built upon), once the present planned development has been completed, there will be little to no room for any additional houses. Table 2 shows a significant expansion in the population of Mt Nancy from a low of 50 in 1977 to 100 in August 1979. Much of this immigration is a direct response to the development which has occurred there and to the fact that, with strong and confident leadership, Mt Nancy is regarded as a quiet and pleasant place in which to live. The probability is that Mt Nancy and other camps, either through natural increase or through immigration, will, in the future, require additional land and this fact should not be ignored by the Alice Springs town planners. It is

therefore important that, when future subdivisions are planned, future expansion of town camps should be taken into account and provision made for their expansion. Such a provision would also provide a buffer zone between town camps and the gathering Alice Springs conurbation, a zone which should assist town campers to preserve their own integrity and the way of life they cherish, especially during the period in which they are settling into a new lifestyle based on conventional housing.

A final matter which should also be considered is the setting aside of permanent camping grounds for Aboriginal visitors to Alice Springs and the provision of services to these areas. These areas should preferably be linked to the town camps which traditionally play hosts to particular Aboriginal visitors. Their location should be made after careful consultation with the traditional Aranda owners of Alice Springs and with representatives of the groups likely to want to camp there. If such areas are recognized and services are provided, Aborigines from outlying areas could be accommodated more satisfactorily without their being the butt of abuse from local residents who see them as unwelcome and unlawful squatters. They could also be accommodated more economically than by building a number of additional hostels which appears to be the present policy of Aboriginal Hostels. It should be a matter of some concern to Aboriginal Hostels that not all Aborigines want to live in the kind of accommodation that they prescribe and they could well consider the provision and management of camping areas which, in terms of amenities offered, could be little different from those offered in camping areas for tourists anywhere in Australia.

In 1975, fifteen camping areas were proposed (which included four areas for which leasehold applications have subsequently been made). There were to be water and toilet facilities. The proposal, however, was met by the Alice Springs town council with its habitual objections. The mayor and town council expressed their concern to the DAA that the provision of tents and, possibly, water to campers made it quite likely that they would become permanent camping areas. It was the council's viewpoint that such developments were undesirable and would have an adverse effect on whites in the town.

What is particularly difficult to understand, in view of the long history of objections by Alice Springs authorities and the white citizens living there to Aborigines having



somewhere to put their belongings when they visit the town is that the authorities still find it difficult to acknowledge that Aborigines do find the township an attractive place to visit and that increasing numbers of them also find it an attractive place in which to live and find employment. As Aboriginal education improves and the prospects for employment increase, so this latter group is enlarged. The irony is that if the town council was prepared to provide appropriate amenities in the right places it would to a large extent be able to control the 'problem' which by and large is its own creation, that of Aborigines camping here and there around the town, often in places in full view of tourists and citizens, to the detriment of the 'image' of the township. Aborigines too are likely to find such an approach preferable, for they would be provided with the amenities which would allow them to take care of their persons as they think fit and be sure that they were remaining in a place where they would not be harassed by vigilant citizens more concerned with the superficial appearance of the town than with the rottenness which lurks just below its surface.

## Chapter 8

### Development at Mt Nancy, 1976-78

By the end of 1975, all that had been provided for the many permanent homeless Aboriginal people living in and around Alice Springs were a few ablution blocks and five small units built at Charles River. Paradoxically, the five units had been built not for the permanent residents, but to house occasional Aboriginal visitors to Alice Springs. In fact the typical government and local response to the town campers during this lengthy period during which Alice Springs itself had greatly expanded was to neglect the camps in the hope that the town campers would simply disappear and, from time to time, try to force campers to move to Amoonguna. By the end of 1975 then, the overriding experience of town campers during their long association with the town was one of rejection by white authorities and individual whites. Rejection took many forms, the most strident of which was the chorus of abuse directed from time to time at the town campers by many sections of the Alice Springs public. The wounds inflicted on the town campers were great and the degree of resentment of the white man and all he represented and the cynicism about his intentions ran very deep.

The next three chapters of this monograph examine the work of the Aboriginal Housing Panel at Mt Nancy. The Panel had been set up by the McMahon government to advise the Commonwealth on suitable low cost housing for remote Aborigines.<sup>1</sup> In 1975, the Panel realized that the mere delivery of a house was not sufficient to ensure that it would be utilized to the full. The Panel therefore decided to concentrate more on establishing methods of determining appropriate housing for Aboriginal groups than on the identification of appropriate designs which might suit the requirements of such groups.

Mt Nancy was the first Aboriginal group with which the Panel worked. It was therefore the first opportunity that

<sup>1</sup>For a brief discussion of the Panel see Heppell (1979: Epilogue).



the Panel had to develop its own approach to providing suitable housing for Aboriginal groups. At the time, the Panel was concerned that housing should reflect the social organization of the people for which it was designed and therefore introduce as little forced social change as possible to the society. The Panel had articulated an approach to formulating designs for Aboriginal groups which was based on an architect participating in a design process with the Aboriginal group concerned (Heppell 1976). Briefly, it was envisaged that the architect would familiarize himself with the living patterns of a group before proceeding to detailed design discussions. Preferably, the underlying designs should emanate from the members of the group, and these features should be converted into an architectural form by the architect. The community would, in effect, use the architect as a resource, drawing on his own knowledge and expertise as to what was practical and possible. The process was to be interactive. The architect would discuss how each design feature reflected some element in the culture of the group and either did or did not contribute to it. The architect would also present a range of options to the group, explaining what he understood to be the consequences of each option. The group would then determine which options it preferred. The approach was to ensure that the group made the final choices and the resulting design would reflect the group's requirements.

Experience soon demonstrated how naive was this view of the design process. It focused entirely on the design of buildings rather than on a coherent development plan (economic, social and physical) for a depressed community of which one aspect would be the improvement of physical amenities. The need for a coherent development plan soon became apparent in Alice Springs where, to ensure that any development program had a reasonable probability of success, it was necessary to help the town campers to revitalize themselves and to approach any developments in a purposeful way.

One crucial aspect of the Panel's approach was that it did require its architects to spend time with the people they were advising. It therefore gave an architect the opportunity to refine the approach to fit the particular situation in which he found himself.

The formulation of an outline of a design process was one thing. A crucial ingredient in the success of such an enterprise was the architect concerned, the relationship he

developed with the Aboriginal group and his ability to develop the Panel's imprecise formulations into a coherent framework within which the successful development of the town camps could take place. The philosophy of the architect concerned was clearly an important aspect of the role he was likely to play.

The architect concerned was Julian Wigley. His architectural education took place during the social upheavals of the 1960s, when a number of fundamental questions were posed about the role of architects and, in France at least, the questions led to architectural students taking direct political action in the streets in 1968. In particular, questions were asked about the relationship between architect and client when the latter tended to be large institutions, both government and business, which required plans and designs according to specifications which often took little or no account of the people who were going to live or work in the buildings or of the people who would be displaced by the new development. Good examples of such institutionalized planning regardless of the social consequences are the redevelopment projects in inner city suburbs where intricate networks of social relationships often exist which are simply destroyed by the developers while the inhabitants are usually resettled randomly elsewhere (Jacobs 1962). Such wholesale redevelopments have, in fact, very similar consequences for the former citizens as the Alice Springs authorities' approach to housing Aborigines have for Aborigines. In the former, communities are destroyed as the people are 'pepper potted' into different neighbourhoods in much the same way as the Housing Commission would 'pepper pot' members of Aboriginal communities throughout the suburbs of Alice Springs. In the view of some, professional architects had many parallels with the bureaucrat. They were

nothing but personnel of organisations. They execute programmes handed down to them, no matter what. They do not criticize and reject programmes in terms of their own best judgement and their ethical responsibilities (Goodman 1973).

The questioning, then, was of a professional architectural tradition which accepted commissions to design buildings as if that action was divorced from any responsibility for the social consequences flowing from that building or development.

From this reappraisal of the values and ethics of the



profession, there emerged a number of architects determined to take architecture back to its well springs as a profession serving the interests of the individual in society. These architects would recognize that built forms, in their simple states, were reflections of and often statements about social forms. The approach came to be known as the 'activist tradition' (Jencks 1973). Implicit in the approach was a set of value judgments possessed by the architect on the merits of the society in which he worked and of the clients he was likely to serve. Many of these value judgments were adverse, but in the situation of Aborigines the value judgments and the client were in harmony. For an architect like Wigley, commitment to the clients was likely to be deep, enduring and would come to affect most areas of his life.

The Housing Panel was by no means the first architectural organization with which the Mt Nancy community had been associated. In the eighteen months to January 1976, no fewer than three organizations had served the community as architectural consultants. During this time, little was achieved. In June 1974, when the first firm of architects was appointed, the fifty or so people living in Mt Nancy had one tap, an old broken-down shower which nobody used, and some lavatories constructed by themselves. By 1976, they had a few more lavatories and one more shower, largely funded and erected through the efforts of the local St Vincent de Paul Society.

At the instigation of the local office of the DAA, tenders were called in June 1974 from two firms of Alice Springs architects to prepare a land use plan for Mt Nancy as a preliminary to obtaining a lease over the site occupied by the community. The plan was to incorporate 10 houses, 6 visitors' flats, 6 pensioners' flats, 8 single quarters of one-room flats, a camping area with all necessary ablutions, a communal laundry and the location of all car parking. It is not clear on what demographic data these requirements were based for they were considerably in excess of the requirements of the Mt Nancy community and bore little relationship to what the community considered most appropriate to its needs.

Both architectural firms tendered for this commission. One tender was for \$240 and the other for \$20. The tenders were referred to the Darwin office of the DAA. Without apparently discussing the tenders with either firm, the Department rather surprisingly accepted the higher one and that firm was commissioned to prepare a land use plan on 12

August 1974.

In March 1975, the firm submitted a development plan for Mt Nancy estimated to be carried out at a cost of \$406,016. By this time, this firm had submitted bills for fees for professional services rendered amounting to \$1640. In April 1975, the Mt Nancy Housing Association terminated its services. In May the Housing Association received a further communication from the firm: a bill for the \$240 initially tendered.

The Mt Nancy Housing Association then appointed a building company to succeed the architects as technical consultants. This company, however, was not acceptable to the Darwin office of the DAA. At that time, the department in the Northern Territory was guided by the terms of a document known as Circular 130, which stipulated that no person or organization other than a member of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects or Institution of Engineers (Australia) could act as technical consultants to an Aboriginal housing association. No member of the building company was a member of either institute and it was on these grounds that the appointment was not permitted.

The Mt Nancy Housing Association then turned to the original lower tenderer, and invited this practice to act as its architectural consultant. For a number of reasons, the firm never did any work for the housing association, and shortly after its appointment its services were terminated.

In 1976, when the Housing Panel was appointed architectural consultants to the Mt Nancy Housing Association, the community was most sceptical about the value of the services an architect could provide. The community had initially been led to believe that housing would quickly follow the appointment of an architect, but, after eighteen months and three different firms of consultants had witnessed not one single change to the unsatisfactory physical environment it inhabited that could be attributed to architectural endeavour. At the beginning of 1976, a time of tumultuous political change in Australia, most members of the Mt Nancy community were also extremely sceptical about the new Liberal National Country Party government's good intentions, not to mention being angry over what the community regarded as the previous government's broken promises to provide housing. The morale of the community was not good: nor was it helped by a large number of deaths (about 12 per cent of the community) in the short period between the end of 1975 and mid-1976. The



climate then for the Housing Panel was far from auspicious. From the Panel's point of view, if a housing scheme was to be successful, clearly more was required than the design of a set of appropriate houses.

#### Leasehold application

Part of the problem of the lack of any development at Mt Nancy between June 1974 and the end of 1975 was the fact that the community did not have secure title to the land it occupied. Formal application for a lease had been made by the community on 27 February 1974. In June 1974, the DAA was informed by the Department of Housing and Construction that a diversion drain was to be constructed taking 40 metres off the southeastern boundary of the lease (the drain had been approved for 12 months unbeknown to the Mt Nancy community and the DAA).<sup>2</sup> Apart from this information, progress of the application was slow. It was not until 17 July 1975 that the Department of the Northern Territory was able to place the leasehold application on public exhibition. During the three months of public exhibition, there were no objections to the lease. Despite this fact, it took DONT a further eight months from the end of the period of public exhibition to grant the community a lease.

At the beginning of 1976, when the Housing Panel inquired about the status of the leasehold application, DONT replied that the Administrator's Council had refused to process it until after advice was received from the Land Commissioner about possible land claims over the area. This leasehold application, then, had become entangled in the same kind of 'misapprehension' that had plagued the Ntapa application described in the previous chapter. The uncertain feature of this leasehold application meant that the Panel's first job with Mt Nancy was to assist the community to secure a satisfactory residential lease, for without one no buildings whatsoever could be erected and it was pointless to discuss housing.

Contact was established by the Panel with the Land Commissioner, and on 4 March 1976, DONT was officially informed that the Land Commissioner had not conducted specific inquiries into the Mt Nancy application as this application was regarded as being dealt with under normal land application

<sup>2</sup>Community adviser, Alice Springs, 2 July 1974: Note for file.

procedures.<sup>3</sup> According to DONT, this information was received too late for the department to be able to process it before the following meeting of the Administrator's Council almost a fortnight later on 16 March. With further reminders of the urgency of the application, DONT submitted it to the meeting of the Administrator's Council of the 15 April 1976, when it was approved, just over two years after the initial submission was made.

The problems of obtaining a lease to the Mt Nancy site were, however, far from over. On 31 March 1976, DONT submitted a draft of the proposed leasehold covenants and conditions to the Mt Nancy Housing Association for approval. A development program costing between \$30,000 and \$100,000 over a five-year period was envisaged (compare these figures with the March 1975 estimate of \$406,016). In the leasehold conditions, no reference was made to housing being built at Mt Nancy (the specific purpose for which the Mt Nancy Housing Association had been incorporated). Instead, DONT assumed that a number of small unserviced 'cabins' would be constructed for the permanent residents. The Department therefore stipulated that certain basic amenities should be provided for each group of six cabins. In addition, none of these buildings, nor any other structure, nor any vehicle or trailer should be situated closer than 15 metres from the perimeter of the site, and this 15-metre border area should be densely planted with trees.

The implications were clear. An unsightly town camp of substandard cabins and humpies was to be permitted but must be concealed from the view of the general Alice Springs public and, perhaps, more importantly, from anyone passing along the road to or from Darwin. The covenants said much more about DONT's underlying attitudes about town campers and their potential attainments than it did about the possible course that developments at Mt Nancy might take.

The Mt Nancy Housing Association considered the covenants proposed and decided that they were unacceptable. It decided to approach the DAA to see if it would be able to effect some change on the part of DONT at an interdepartmental level. Huey wrote to the First Assistant Secretary of the Lands and Community Development division pointing out that the 'tone of the conditions proposed indicates that your Department foresees a possibly unsightly Aboriginal camp which must be

<sup>3</sup>DAA to DONT 4 March 1976.



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screened from the community as much as possible.<sup>4</sup> He pointed out that the permanent secretary of the department had supported the proposal that the development of Mt Nancy should be integrated with the township by building houses of an approved design in evidence before the Interim Land Commissioner. He also pointed out that a 15-metre buffer zone would severely restrict development of a 4.4 hectare site, part of which could not be used for building purposes as it comprised a rocky outcrop, and that such a setback was surprising in light of the fact that the normal Alice Springs setback was only 7.8 metres, a distance which could be further reduced by compliance with certain building requirements. He enclosed architectural drawings prepared by the Panel showing a development plan estimated to cost a total of \$535,000 and hoped that they would enable the Department to reconsider the covenants.

Huey's letter had the desired effect. The permanent secretary of DONT telexed Huey that:

the concern you express is understandable and arises from misinterpretations given to early plans submitted on the development by the Regional Coordinator and the planner in our division who has and was then working in isolation.<sup>5</sup>

He then went on to set out a set of covenants which were perfectly acceptable to Mt Nancy and envisaged a development program costing \$500,000 within four years.

On 15 June 1976, the Mt Nancy Housing Association was formally advised that the Minister of the Northern Territory had approved the grant of a lease for the purpose of establishing, developing and maintaining a communal settlement for the use of the Mt Nancy Housing Association. The Mt Nancy community was then able to turn its attention to what it had for long desired, the kind of development which would give it the amenities and comforts which had been so long denied.

#### Initial development of the lease

Housing was not the Mt Nancy community's most pressing

<sup>4</sup>R.Huey to the Secretary, DONT, n.d. - Mt Nancy Housing Association - Lot 5135, Alice Springs.

<sup>5</sup>V.T.O'Brien to R.Huey, 11 May 1976 - Mt Nancy Housing Association.

priority. More than most of the other town camps in Alice Springs, too often Mt Nancy played unwilling host to inquisitive tourists in search of a free freak show, trail bike riders demonstrating white dominance over blacks by tearing around the camp and terrifying everyone there and especially mothers with small children, drunks and especially white nocturnal ones in search of a cheap Aboriginal lay, and the police whose activities, to the Mt Nancy community, often seemed to parallel those of the trail bike louts. In light of these kinds of harassment, camp security was placed at the top of Mt Nancy's list of priorities. What the community most desired was to be able effectively to control access into the camp. The community required a quiet area in which it felt secure to explore its own development without fear of interference from the outside. It knew that without adequate security of the site, it could not contemplate an expensive building program because of fears that it would not be able to obtain adequate control over the amenities for which it would become responsible.

Symbolically, too, the community wanted a clearly demarcated area which it knew was its own and in which it would not only be free from harassment by whites, but from which it could not be expelled at the whim of some officious white instrumentality. For decades this community had felt at the mercy of whites, and it needed a visual reminder that now an area of land could be called its own. Finally, the community realized that, without a secure place, it could not meet one of the conditions of the lease, namely to landscape the boundary with trees and shrubs. Fig.4 graphically depicts the extent of the Mt Nancy community's control before the granting of the lease over access into the camp. Ten separate tracks led into the camp. In addition, there was one large turning circle used by vehicles paying cursory visits to the camp.

Fencing and area lighting were identified by the community as the principal means of providing the kind of security it wanted. By fencing the block, the community could restrict access to the site and would present an obvious boundary beyond which most strangers would be loath to venture. Fencing also provided the community with the first visible proof that it had a secure place to call its own and therefore had a future which it could explore itself. During May and June 1976, with funds supplied by the DAA, the block was fenced leaving one point of entry for vehicles (see Fig.5).



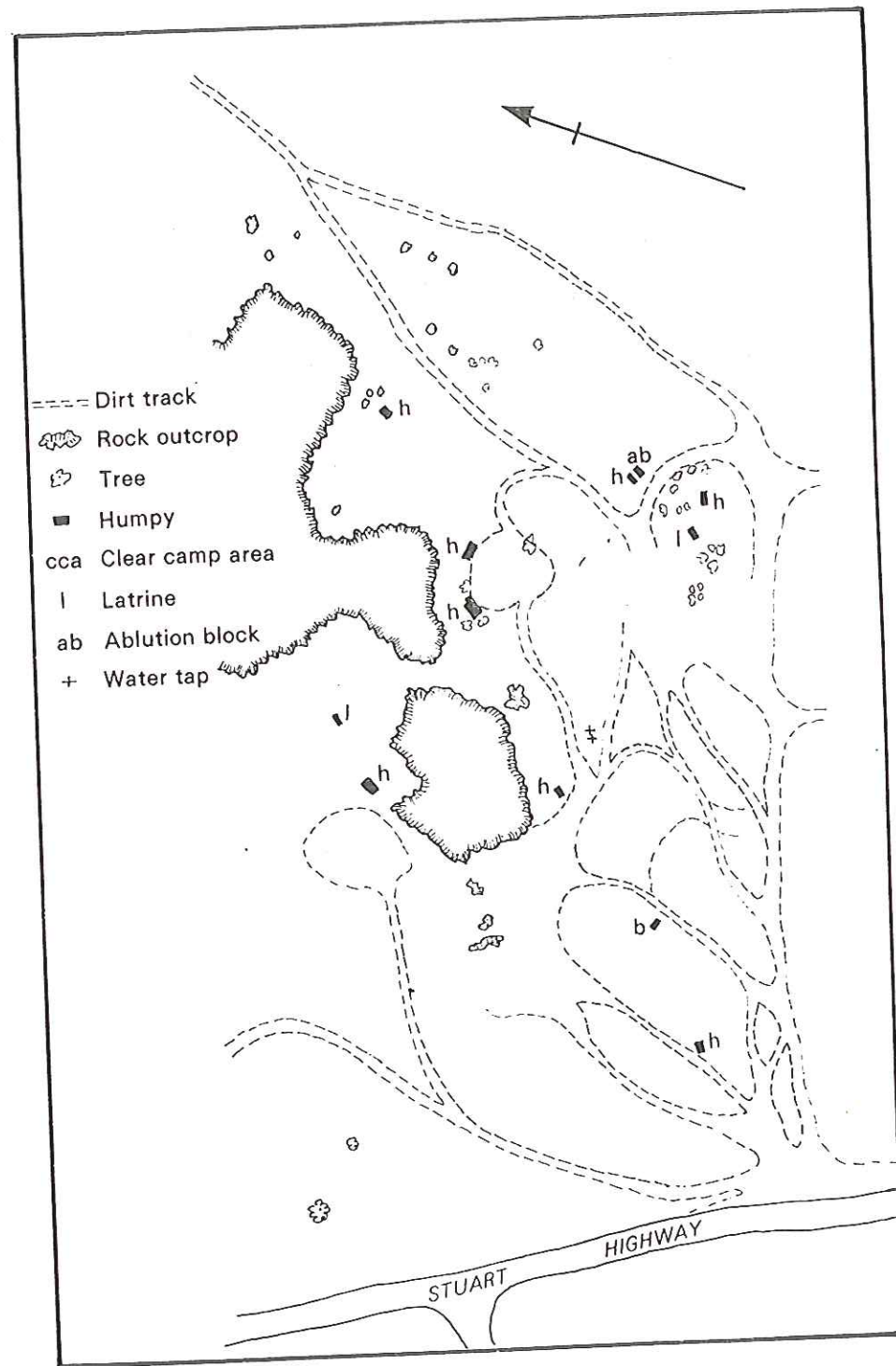


Fig. 4 Mt Nancy before the granting of the lease over the camp

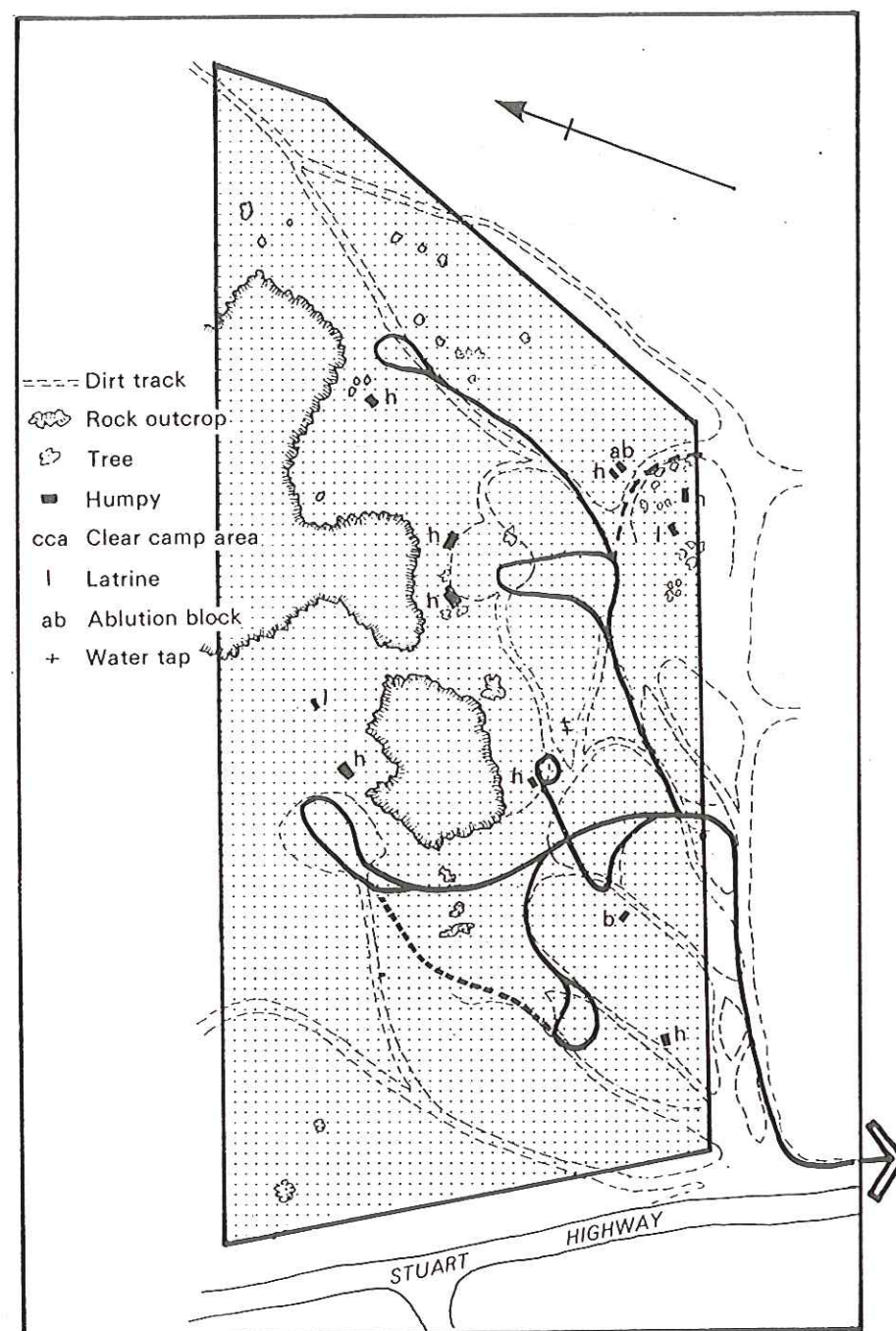


Fig.5 The Mt Nancy area after fencing



Area lighting contributed to the security of the camp after dark. It allowed the community to see who came into the camp and thus discouraged nocturnal prowlers from trying to sneak into the camp unnoticed. Area lighting also discouraged snakes, an ever present worry of town campers in Alice Springs. Area lighting had other advantages too. Located near the humpies, it enabled people to do more things at night because they could see. They could also move round the camp more easily and consequently the social activities of the camp were significantly extended. Sleeping was not inhibited, because separate switches were provided at each light so that the people living nearby could switch one off if they wanted.

With a secure fenced area, the Mt Nancy community's self-confidence increased markedly. The Panel was made aware of it when the area lighting was being installed. Two households asked that electricity lines be extended to their humpies and so allow them to instal refrigerators and lighting there. At the time, the community had insufficient funds to accomplish such an extension. The community was advised accordingly and decided to accept this advice. It was not long, however (a few weeks after the area lighting had been installed), before the community recognized that it had lost an opportunity and the Panel was chided for not having tried harder to obtain the small amount of money required to make these extensions. (Later, as money became available, extempore lines were extended to these humpies and were immediately put to use.)

#### Ablution block

Symbolically, the fencing rather than the formal granting of the lease was the factor which released Mt Nancy from its anxious dependency on white instrumentalities and its fears that it could be evicted from its chosen site almost at any time. According to Geoff Shaw, the community first began to consider that it could begin to focus on the kind of physical environment it would like to create for itself only after it had experienced a period when it was quite free of unwanted visitors and began to realize that it could start to control the activities within the community. The community was not, however, entirely rid of the profound doubts and fears about the good intentions of whites and the government. Often in the past the community believed it had received promises (for example, in 1974 - housing before the end of the year) only to have its expectations disappointed. Each

such situation served to reinforce the community's deep sense of rejection. Consequently, even after the initial developments had occurred, the community was loath to make extensive plans for its future because it did not want to leave itself vulnerable to further rejections and the impact such rejections might have on the gathering self-assurance of some of its members.

In early 1976, the political climate in Aboriginal affairs was also uncertain. The Fraser government had just been elected and, despite assurances about its commitment to Aboriginal land rights, it had given no indication that it regarded the situation of Alice Springs town campers as being of great importance. Further, despite assurance given by its shadow Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Mr Ellicott, in telegrams sent to every Aboriginal community in Australia just before the election that, if elected, a Liberal government would not reduce funding for Aborigines, one of the first actions the Fraser government took was to reduce the Aboriginal Affairs appropriation by about \$7 million.<sup>6</sup> The Mt Nancy people did take an interest in politics and its previous experience of Liberal/NCP governments had not led it to have any heightened expectations of the new one. The community therefore decided to plan for a cautious advance which, in one sense, was intended to test the will of the new government. Rather than embark on the first phase of a housing program, the community decided to apply the funds it had to the construction of an ablution block (see Fig.6) so that it would have access to lavatory, washing, shower and laundry facilities. When completed, the ablution block provided the community with much more than these simple amenities.

The ablution block gave the Mt Nancy community its first permanent and substantial building. The block quickly became the focal point of the community. It was extensively used for ablutions. For the first time in their lives, members of the community could experience the pleasures of having a warm shower whenever they wanted. For parents, this improvement was particularly significant. They could send their children to school in as clean and well groomed a state as the children of the Europeans on the other side of the Stuart Highway, and the children consequently no longer needed to fear that they would suffer the taunts of other children for their unkempt and unclean appearance.

<sup>6</sup>*Canberra Times*, 12 July 1976.



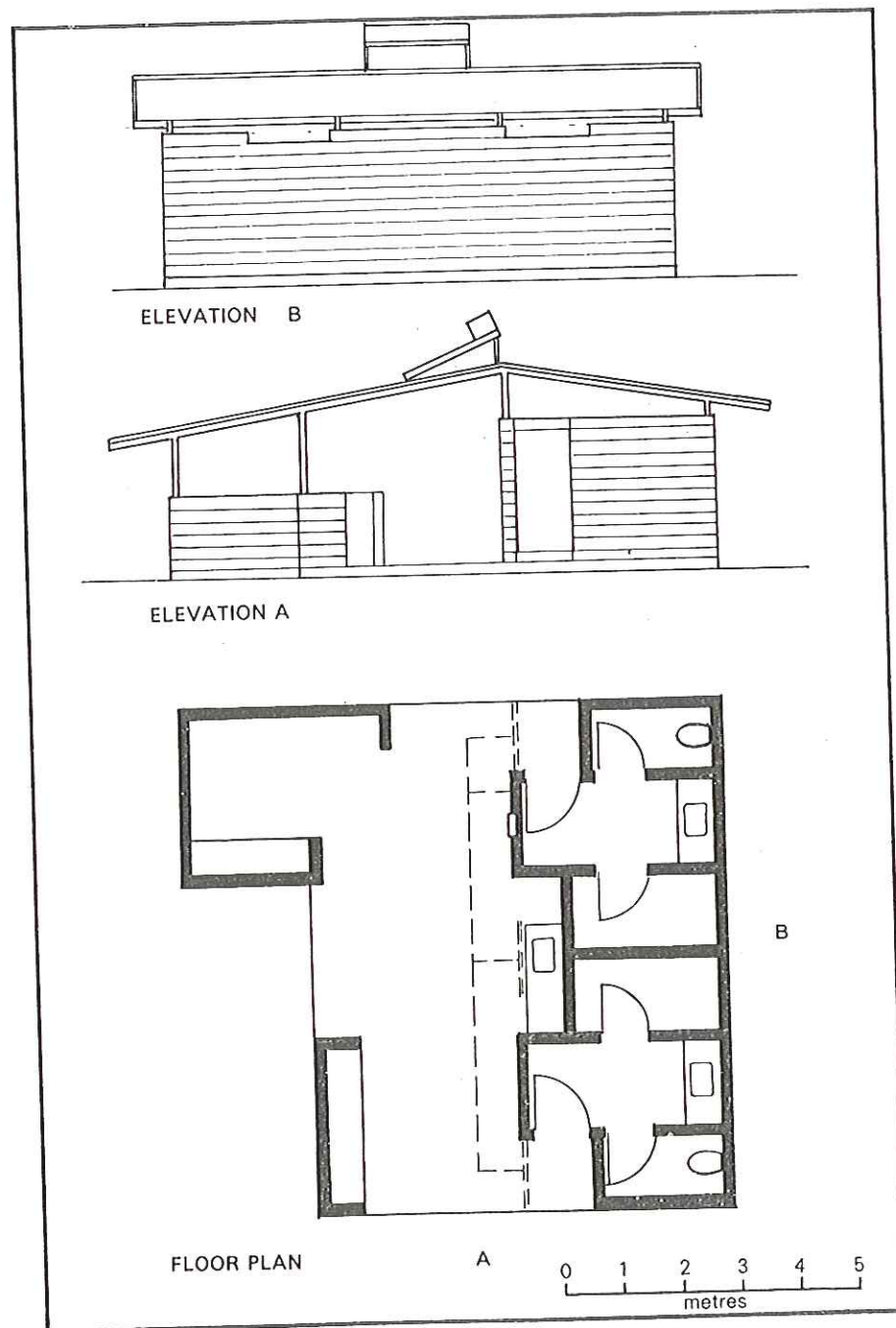


Fig.6 Design for Mt Nancy ablution block

Two washing machines were installed in the ablution block. With their arrival, the block became a focal point for the women in the community. They would gather there to do their daily wash, bathe their infants and gossip.

The community decided to purchase a television set, which was placed in the ablution block, the only place in the camp with a power point. Television provided entertainment for the community in the evening and matters to discuss during the day. It also gave people something to look forward to in the evening and it was noticeable that, after its acquisition, less heavy drinking was done by members of the community. (The boredom of life in town camps must not be underestimated. There is little for people to do during the day, for most are without employment.)

Taking on responsibility for an ablution block and area lighting brought the Mt Nancy community suddenly face to face with a problem it had never before experienced and therefore had barely considered. Hitherto, there had been little requirement for any management of the camp. There were few amenities. Those that there were were only infrequently used. So long as the state of the camp was tolerable, that was good enough. Occasionally a local health inspector made an adverse report on the camp and, in particular, on the state of the pit latrines and the extent of rubbish around the camp. These reports, however, rarely elicited any concerted action on the part of the community. Garbage was an occasional problem, but so long as it was put in the 44-gallon drums dotted round the camp, it was removed by a local refuse collector. Very occasionally, when a part of the camp became too unsightly, people would clean it up.

With the completion of the ablution block and the provision of area lighting, a requirement for day-to-day management of these facilities became apparent. Electricity had to be paid for. The lavatory and shower areas had to be kept clean or they became unseemly. Lavatory paper had to be replenished or, if not, people would use whatever paper was available (sometimes rags or stones were used) and the drains would become blocked. Electric light bulbs had to be replaced from time to time. Maintenance was also required, especially while people were still unaccustomed to the use of a new facility or new machine.

In Alice Springs (and for that matter, throughout Australia) there is no agency or instrumentality which assists



small Aboriginal communities over the initial hurdle of establishing satisfactory management procedures to service new community facilities. The remarkably high rate of failure of Aboriginal communities to cope adequately with new facilities can partly be attributed to the neglect of this important factor. The experiences of Mt Nancy before adequate management procedures were implemented are of great importance in understanding how to solve problems within such a group.

Upon the completion of the ablution block, the Mt Nancy community realized that the block would not simply take care of itself. They did not, however, immediately appreciate the extent of the problem of management. It was assumed that people would clear up any mess they made and would provide their own lavatory paper. No detergents, mops or lavatory paper were therefore supplied. It was not long before drains became blocked and the women started to complain. The community then decided to ask Wigley to arrange for the bulk purchase of lavatory paper. This request was refused because Wigley considered that it was important for the community to become accustomed to doing such things so that it did not develop a dependency on the Panel's staff and also in order to oblige it to come to terms with the responsibilities it was assuming by seeking to provide certain facilities within the community.

A representative of the community was then designated to go into town and arrange for the bulk purchase. He tried a number of stores, none of which would open an account for the community and all of which demanded cash. The representative did not have sufficient cash with him and so the attempt proved abortive. The representative then approached Wigley and asked him to arrange for purchases by the community to be charged at a store. Wigley did this and the representative was able to return to the shop and complete the purchase. The box of lavatory paper, however, was far too bulky for him to carry the 5km back to Mt Nancy. As no member of the community owned a vehicle, Wigley was again approached and asked to help, which he did, and the first bulk purchase of lavatory paper was taken to the community. The next time the community needed lavatory paper, the representative simply telephoned an order to the supplier and asked him to deliver it. This procedure is now followed for all large orders by the community.

Leaking taps and faulty area lighting presented similar kinds of problem. No member of the community had ever repaired a leaking tap. No wrenches or spanners were owned. Similarly, the community had never been confronted with the problem of replacing a light bulb located 3.5 metres high. No ladders were owned for they had never before been needed. As a problem arose, if the community could not find a satisfactory solution, the Panel architect helped it to find one. In the case of the leaking tap, for example, the community purchased a set of spanners and members were shown how to replace washers. In the case of replacing light bulbs 3.5m high, a Toyota truck was borrowed, was backed up to the light, someone climbed on the cab and changed the bulb. It was not long before the community was dealing with all such problems itself.

The cleaning of the ablution block followed a similar course. The requirement to clean out the block regularly was recognized by the community, especially when it was realized that people did not always clear up their own messes. A number of women volunteered to keep the block clean. The block, however, was not only used by members of Mt Nancy. Across the road was another town camp without any facilities whatsoever. Members of this camp often used the block, as did a number of drunks visiting both camps. These people did not take the same care of the amenity as the people at Mt Nancy and often left the block in a disgusting state. After a number of such occasions, the women felt that their voluntary services were being abused and refused to do the work any more. Faced with this ultimatum, the community decided to employ one of its number on a part-time basis to look after the ablution block and to provide for and maintain the landscaping of the site.

Soon after this person took up his duties, the circuit breaker in the ablution block started to malfunction. The specialized services of a maintenance engineer were required. Again, no member of the community had ever had to seek out the services of any kind of maintenance engineer. No one knew the kinds of skills required to mend a circuit breaker and where they might be found. The Panel architect was asked to mend the circuit breaker. Instead of arranging for this to be done, he introduced the part-time employee to a number of firms in Alice Springs providing maintenance services, and explained the kind of service each provided. With the contacts thus established, and with very occasional help from the Panel architect, the employee sought out the



requisite services whenever they were required and very soon found that he could happily do without the assistance of the Panel.

To a marked extent, the Mt Nancy 'maintenance man' has encouraged and assisted other people to use properly the facilities provided by the ablution block. For he soon realized that misuse or abuse involved him in additional work, often of an extremely unpleasant kind. When misuse occurred through ignorance, a person was shown the correct use. When the misuse occurred through carelessness, a person was roundly taken to task. In both cases, lessons were learnt.

Managing a community facility like an ablution block now causes no problems at Mt Nancy. The whole exercise was salutary for it rehearsed every adult member in coping with the management of a house. The experience was also made available to other town camps as they were confronted with the same problems, and was taken to Tangatjira when the town campers' council was established.

The first three prototype houses were completed in December 1977 and the families moved in. Several months later the Department of Construction started to service the site. The houses therefore had kitchens, bathrooms and lavatories, all of which were unconnected to services. With the availability of the ablution block, there was no pressure on the new householders to use the unconnected amenities as so often happens with Aboriginal housing.

The ablution block also played a major role in the discussions by the community about house plans and the location of houses. Being sited centrally, it provided the community with a visual reckoner of the scale of any future development. After its completion, individuals found it much easier to decide on the distances they preferred between houses and revised their intended locations. A number of people began seriously to reconsider the size of the house they thought suitable, with a tendency to ask for smaller houses with fewer rooms. This process continued into the house building program. After the completion of the first three houses, one pensioner decided that he did not require a house after all, but preferred to live in a caravan.

The building of the ablution block, however, was not without its difficulties. As Geoff Shaw stated (quoted in



Chapter 4) the main Alice Springs trunk sewerage pipe passed within 100m of the boundary of the Mt Nancy camp. The community applied to have its buildings hooked up to the main drainage. This application was refused. The Department of Construction considered that the fall of the Mt Nancy site meant that pumping equipment would have to be installed if it was to be linked to the main drainage system, and that this alternative was too costly. The community felt powerless, for, in such matters, when a Commonwealth Department has made a decision, especially when it was the DAA's expert adviser on all aspects of construction in Aboriginal settlements and communities, there are no realistic channels of appeal. Mt Nancy had to make do with a septic system which it did not want and which further reduced the area of land which the community could use for its own purposes. The community doubted that a white suburban subdivision with similar falls would have been so restricted and considered that the fact that Mt Nancy was an Aboriginal camp was a factor in the Department's decision to give the community second best. A septic system was also less convenient. It created certain management problems for the community like arranging for tanks to be pumped out from time to time which would not be required if the sewerage was removed by way of the main drains.

By the time the Mt Nancy ablution block was completed, Wigley had been working in Alice Springs for approximately ten months. During that time he had developed a close working relationship with the Mt Nancy community such that, when problems did arise, people went immediately to him to provide an answer. The close working relationship was enhanced by Wigley's personality and attitudes, his (for an architect) unconventional dress (he did not wear rich man's clothes) and by the fact that he chose to live at Amoonguna while he was working at Alice Springs. Living at Amoonguna enabled Wigley to extend his contacts to members of other tribes and to observe Aboriginal practices while he was 'relaxing' at home. Wigley's ability to help the Mt Nancy community was also enhanced by the fact that he knew each person in the camp personally and the quality of assistance each might require. He was always immediately available and did not work in a conventional office block with other whites but on a verandah which was not being used by the Central Land Council. The community understood the relationship and when a problem did arise they knew that they would get suggestions from Wigley (and other assistance if necessary) about how to go about solving it. They also knew that, in the final analysis, it



would be they who would have to take the decisive action.

It might be interesting to compare this approach with the more orthodox approach of the Department of Construction (and consultant architects) because the Commonwealth government has decided that the Panel's approach was inappropriate, and now the Department of Construction is responsible for the development programs in the Alice Springs town camps. The Department of Construction appears to regard its responsibilities as providing an architect to design buildings based on a small number of formal meetings with representatives of an Aboriginal housing association. He discusses what the representatives require in the way of number of bedrooms and the materials with which a house is to be built. Often the architect has no prior knowledge of the community and no understanding whatsoever of its practices and social organization. Nor does the architect consider what kind of overall development plan is most suitable for the community. His responsibility is to prepare a design of a building and nothing else. Later he will be responsible for superintending its construction. After the architect has designed a building, he discusses the plan with members of the community with the help of architectural drawings and sometimes a scale model of the building. He asks if any modifications are required and usually finds that none are. In fact, to a non-literate people totally unfamiliar with the detail drawings of an architect, this part of the process is of little value. Having obtained the community's approval of the design, the architect arranges for the construction of the building and when that is completed he hands it over to the community. It is then that his responsibilities for that design are over (except for the superintending of the rectification of any faults in construction). I have heard of no example of an architect in the Department of Construction returning to evaluate the uses to which the building is put and to obtain some feedback of the community's opinion of the building. Sometimes, if the architect is retained by the community, he might arrange to have things like blocked lavatories rectified, usually by getting a maintenance engineer to visit the community.

In this process, there is no guarantee for the community that the same architect who takes the community's brief will still be there to proceed to the sketch and detail design stages, nor that it will be he who will superintend the construction. Such lack of continuity of staff does not assist the development of a close and personal working relationship



with an Aboriginal group. Nor does it lead to the development of a reasonable level of understanding of the organization and practices of a group such that the resulting architecture is broadly in sympathy with them. The termination of an architect's responsibilities when a building is handed over also means that a community is suddenly and without preparation thrust into the field of grappling with management problems elicited by a new building and a process which they have barely begun to understand and in which they have had little involvement. In the absence of any other agency in the field, the community has nowhere to turn for support. It is at this stage that, very often, buildings constructed for Aborigines begin to suffer, for with maintenance not being done and the building put to uses for which it was not designed, it begins to deteriorate. If the deterioration is not arrested, it often accelerates. The result is an expensive house built with an economic use of an architect's time but with a rapid depreciation of that investment far in excess of any money savings which might have been made in the design process.

The Panel viewed development as a coherent whole not only to provide buildings of the kind required but also to ensure that the physical environment in which the buildings were located fostered the appropriate use of the buildings (thus by placing the ablution block in an already fenced and lit area, the block manifestly became the responsibility of the Mt Nancy community). The Panel also considered that, in the absence of any other agency, its responsibilities also included assisting the community to come to terms with the organizational problems arising from the development. This part of the process could only be successfully undertaken with an understanding of the people and society concerned, and an expectation on the part of the people that the requisite support would be forthcoming in an acceptable way. Part of that support could only be given with an understanding of the functions a building and its various component parts were designed to fulfil. Consequently, the architect who designed the building was in a position second to none to provide the requisite support.

The form that development took in the town camps was greatly to the advantage of the Panel. The need to get leasehold titles to land and the time that this took gave Wigley time and the opportunity to demonstrate unequivocally his commitment to the interests of the town campers. The campers were also made aware that the Panel backed Wigley's commitment. During this period, apart from developing



personal relationships with the town campers, Wigley was also able to develop an understanding of the principles by which a town camp operated, the relationships between households and an understanding of the social organization of each town camp. In this way, the design process was allowed to develop its own pace. The development took an orderly form, and the members of a camp did not become impatient for action and buildings on the ground. The leaseholds and the fencing were the symbols which were required and therefore the campers were more interested in appropriate functional buildings than in using these forms to make a statement to the rest of Alice Springs.

In the context of the development which was subsequently to take place in the other town camps, the process described above was important, for it came to serve as a model for the others. The members of Mt Nancy became the ambassadors and talked about their program and the problems that they had experienced with other camps. The experience gained was put freely to the use of other campers. Without exception, they responded by specifying a development program in the same order as that implemented at Mt Nancy, although each wanted details particular to its own requirements.

## Chapter 9

### Consultation and the design process

At Mt Nancy there was no question that housing was wanted. The community had been pressing for it for a number of years. The benefits of housing were recognized by most members of the community, some of whom had already had experience of living in houses as tenants of the Housing Commission. Among other things housing was regarded as an important element in having the town camp integrated into the township of Alice Springs and its members becoming recognized as permanent and responsible citizens. Housing would also satisfactorily draw to a close the process which had started with the acquisition of the lease and which would give the community the residential security it had so long desired.

The Mt Nancy community had already made up its mind about a number of details of the housing it required and these were given to Wigley at the first formal meeting he had with the inhabitants. The houses had to be of conventional appearance so that they would conform with housing erected elsewhere in Alice Springs. They were to be built in brick. Prefabricated panellized systems were specifically rejected because, to the Mt Nancy community, they looked like W.C. blocks or 'pig pens'. The community also requested that each design be related to the individual requirements of the members of the community. It was particularly critical of the previous architectural consultant who had shown two previously prepared designs, neither of which had arisen out of discussions with anyone in Mt Nancy. According to members of the community, what particularly irritated them was that neither design paid due regard to the differing requirements of individual families within the community.

For the Panel, Mt Nancy's requirement that recognition be given to the individual requirements of each household was particularly pleasing. Alice Springs had been chosen as a suitable location for work because, its being an urban environment, the likelihood that housing was a high priority



among the Aboriginal citizens would be great. In settlements, in contrast, where many Aborigines were resident almost by default, there was no such certainty that housing was a high priority nor, indeed, that it was even required. The Panel also believed that a greater diversity of living arrangements would occur in an urban situation because recent arrivals from remote settlements would be rubbing shoulders with residents who had lived there all their lives. Consequently, the range of requirements was likely to be greater in such a situation than it would be in a remote settlement, and the resulting designs, if found suitable, would be applicable far beyond the boundaries of the urban environment. Further, Alice Springs being a centre for a vast area and town camps being the preferred place for most visitors to stay whilst they were visiting Alice Springs, any houses built there would, in a sense, become show houses open to the critical eye of the many visitors passing through.

After an initial census which revealed eleven households and not the fifteen he had been led to believe were resident at Mt Nancy, Wigley held detailed discussions with each household about the kind of house it wanted, the amenities to be provided and the general form the house should take. With assistance from Wigley, each household drew up a floor plan which it considered matched its requirements (see Appendix III for examples).

The common elements in a house such as W.C., bathroom, bedrooms, internal living area and (apart from one old pensioner) kitchenette leading off from the internal living area, were specified in all. There were, however, important areas of difference:

- a) Aspect. Although all but one of the household groups wanted a verandah, there were preferences as to orientation and extent:
  - i. 6 households wanted the main verandah to face east and have aspects facing both north and south;
  - ii. 1 household wanted the verandah to face east with an aspect to the south;
  - iii. 2 households wanted the verandah to face north with an aspect to the east;
  - iv. 2 households wanted the verandah to face south with aspects to east and west. One of these groups also wanted the verandah to surround the house.

- b) Flywire enclosed area. Despite the fact that (as everybody admitted) in a camp situation any flywire enclosed area including flywire doors was likely to be damaged in no time at all, six households specifically requested a flywire enclosed area. All these households had had extensive experience of doing stockwork on Centralian stations. To an outsider, an obvious feature of many Centralian homesteads is a flywire enclosed verandah where the owner and his family often retire to relax after dark. This domestic area would probably be the only part of a station open to the view of an Aboriginal stockman.
- c) Relationship of kitchen with W.C. and bathroom. Eight households wanted a physical separation between kitchen and W.C. According to all of them, drains frequently became blocked in Aboriginal houses and with continued use, filthy, faeces-ridden water would flow back into the kitchen. All were concerned that this would not occur in their house. On the other hand, three households wanted the kitchen to be located close to the W.C., laundry and bathroom for convenience.
- d) Laundry. There were a number of views about the most suitable location for a laundry:
- i. 6 households wanted a separate laundry;
  - ii. 2 households wanted the laundry incorporated into the bathroom;
  - iii. 1 household wanted the laundry incorporated into the W.C.;
  - iv. 2 households consisting of elderly people did not want a laundry at all, preferring to use the communal facilities.
- e) External doors. The placement of external doors also showed great variation. In four of the floor plans, a person sitting on the verandah could observe all the external doors and therefore anyone entering or leaving the house. In all the other floor plans this level of control was not possible. In four of the floor plans, the external doors were located at front and rear of the house; in three, they were located at the front and one side of the house and in four, they were all located along one wall of the house. The number of external doors also varied from two to four.



At this point, conventional architectural wisdom, at least in the case of providing housing for Aborigines, would have had the architect proceed to prepare sketch designs to meet the stated requirements of the Mt Nancy households. At this stage in the development of Mt Nancy such a step would have been premature, because Wigley felt uncertain that the given floor plans would meet the requirements of each household group. By starting with a given end, that is the idea of a house and the requirement of a floor plan, the design process had neither beginning nor content. Rather than build up an idea of the appropriate relationship of housing to overall development and rooms within a house to the overall function of the house and then relate that to an understanding of the living patterns of the household and the group, Wigley had floor plans which begged the important questions of how they would be used and whether or not each household understood their implications. Wigley simply could not demonstrate how suitable each floor plan was and how it would accommodate the living patterns of a particular household.

It was necessary to go back to a proper beginning and collect information about the ways in which each household used the spaces it created for itself, the relationship that each household had with each other, the kinds of interaction that occurred between them and how these interactions contributed to the overall social organization of the camp.

In 1976 there was no information about these aspects of camp life. An anthropologist, Jeff Collmann, had worked at Mt Nancy, but in 1976 had just returned to Adelaide to write up his data. Collmann himself was very helpful, briefing Wigley about a number of aspects of social life at Mt Nancy which gave the latter some understanding of the workings of the camp and of the local problems experienced there. More information, however, was necessary to test the appropriateness of the floor plans directed by each household. Wigley therefore set about observing the way the households used their own individual camps and, when he did not understand the function of a particular behaviour, he usually asked the people concerned why they did the particular thing not understood. This period of observation could not be an intensive one as Wigley was assisting a number of other Aboriginal communities at the same time, especially other town camps, in the time-consuming work of processing lease applications.

Initially movements between households were mapped to produce a network of the relationships within the camp and to determine the frequency and extent of interactions between the households. At the same time, descriptions were prepared of the way that interactions were initiated and of their content.

Movement within the camp indicated that there were two social groups, the core of each of which were two brothers. Interaction between households within each group was frequent, usually at one particular camp where most social gatherings occurred. Thus, at most times of the day, numbers of people could be found at the camp of an old paraplegic woman, who, as a pensioner, usually had supplies at least sufficient to keep a billy of tea brewing. The locations of social gatherings did change from day to day, often following the household or households which had money to spend and had recently bought supplies. Important to the formation of these gatherings was the ability of people to see where they were occurring and to know who had entered the camp with supplies of groceries or other commodities.

Visitors to Mt Nancy also provided occasions for social gatherings. People were always wanting to catch up with the news of a place and about kinsmen and their affairs. In this respect, the ability to observe all the entrances in Mt Nancy was important so that the identity of any visitor was immediately known (it was also important in respect of unwanted visitors like whites and drunks so that people could make themselves scarce if that was considered necessary).

In 1976 there were ten separate tracks leading into the camp, some of which could not be seen from every household camp (see Fig.7). Without fencing, however, the tracks in no way limited the points of entry of visitors into Mt Nancy. People on foot, in particular, would enter at any convenient point. With the fencing of the site and the reduction of entry points to one, visual surveillance of movements into Mt Nancy was enhanced. (Later an additional entry point was made in recognition of the fact that the two groups, focused on the two sets of brothers, wanted to remain separate.) It was important that the plan should provide each house with a reasonable view of the entrance into the camp.

Although it had little to do with movement within the camp, individuals and especially those who worked as stockmen took a great interest in the traffic passing along the Stuart



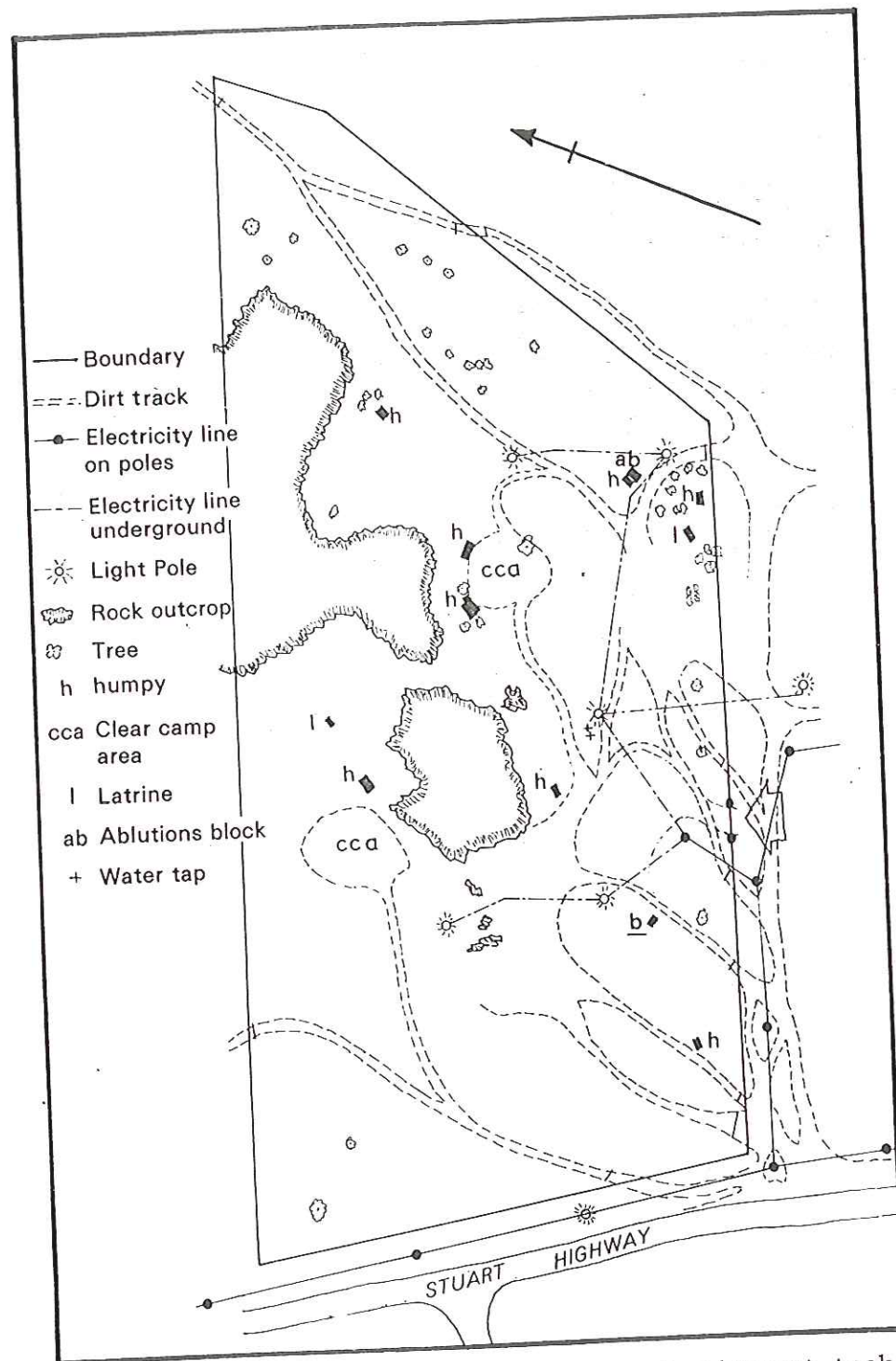


Fig.7 Plan of Mt Nancy camp before any development took place

Highway. In this way they knew the northern visitors into Alice Springs and especially which station owners were in town. The stockmen often used this knowledge to approach station owners to ascertain whether or not any work was available.

Movement between households was often initiated by visual cues. Interest in an activity was expressed or an invitation was made by signals. Centralian Aborigines have a highly developed sign language (especially the women) and town campers use this medium extensively both to seek and issue invitations and to pass messages between households without either having to leave his own camp.

This mode of communication had implications for houses in a town plan, for it suggested that areas in which activities were likely to occur should be visible from other houses of members of a particular social group.

Another factor which initiated movement from a household camp was noise, and in particular sounds of an argument or an abusive drunk and cries for help. Internal squabbles and domestic quarrels were of great concern to other members of the community, for, if they were not contained, they could lead to outbreaks of violence and indeed to divisions which threatened the social fabric of the community and sometimes resulted in families leaving for some other location. When a quarrel did erupt, non-participants would take an active interest if it showed signs of getting out of hand and try to calm and separate the warring parties.

It was also important to be able to hear cries for help, especially from pensioners living alone. If someone was ill, they would cry out and other members would run to their assistance. Crying children would also alert other adults for it could mean a young child had returned from school to find his or her parents away and, in these cases, another family would act as caretaker of the child until the parents returned.

It was difficult to cater for this kind of communication in a housing program. The form of a house and in particular the fact that it was enclosed behind walls would prevent sounds from passing out and into other houses. The community was made aware of this prospective problem, but decided that it was not particularly important as other ways could be found of alerting people if necessary.



A more detailed level of observation was directed at individual households to ascertain how they used the buildings they had made for themselves and the spaces around them. Many of the self-erected dwellings at Mt Nancy were substantial and the uses to which they were put were complex. A short history of one household camp and the changes which occurred within it during a 12-month period illustrates how a dwelling and its surrounding activity area are used. Figure 8 gives the elevation of one camp and Fig.9 shows the change that occurred in the camp when the composition of the households occupying it changed.

In March 1976, the camp site was situated at the western end of Mt Nancy close to the Stuart Highway (see b in Fig.7). It was occupied by one old man who was partly blind. The camp consisted of shelter, windbreak and a tent for visitors. (See B in Fig.9). The dotted lines delineate the area which was kept clean and is referred to in the text as an 'activity area'. At this time, the old man slept in various locations in the vicinity of his shelter, usually in the southern or eastern lea of it. The shelter itself was constructed of 'four by two' posts, sheeted with galvanized iron and was about 1.6m high. It was principally used for storage and as a place into which to retire when it rained or when it was particularly cold. Cooking was done to the east, the side which looked across to the main Mt Nancy camp. This location obtained the full benefit of the early morning sun and was in the shade by late afternoon. Much of the old man's time was spent visiting other households, so that he spent more of his waking hours away from his camp than in it.

In late March the man's niece and her husband attached themselves to this camp. They erected a windbreak and tent on the north side of the shelter. After this, the old man stopped sitting and sleeping in close proximity to this shelter, preferring to do these things some 5m to the south. As the visitors continued to stay, the old man removed his iron bed from inside the shelter, first locating it some 3m to the southeast of the shelter and then, by degrees, dragging it to the middle of the area which he had set aside for sleeping (see bottom of Fig.9).

The location of the tent was carefully planned. Its situation allowed it to be an integral part of the old man's general camp while allowing the married couple to conduct its affairs quite apart from the old man. The tent was located hard by the northern wall of the shelter and was

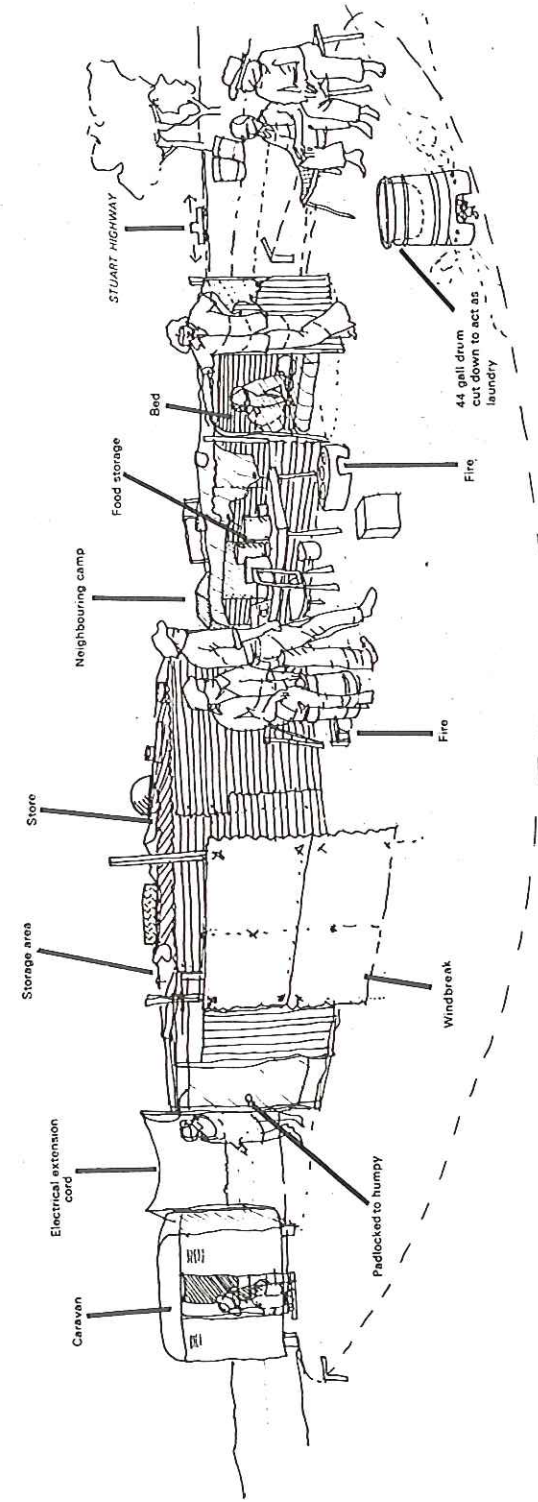


Fig.8 Elevation of camp at Mt Nancy



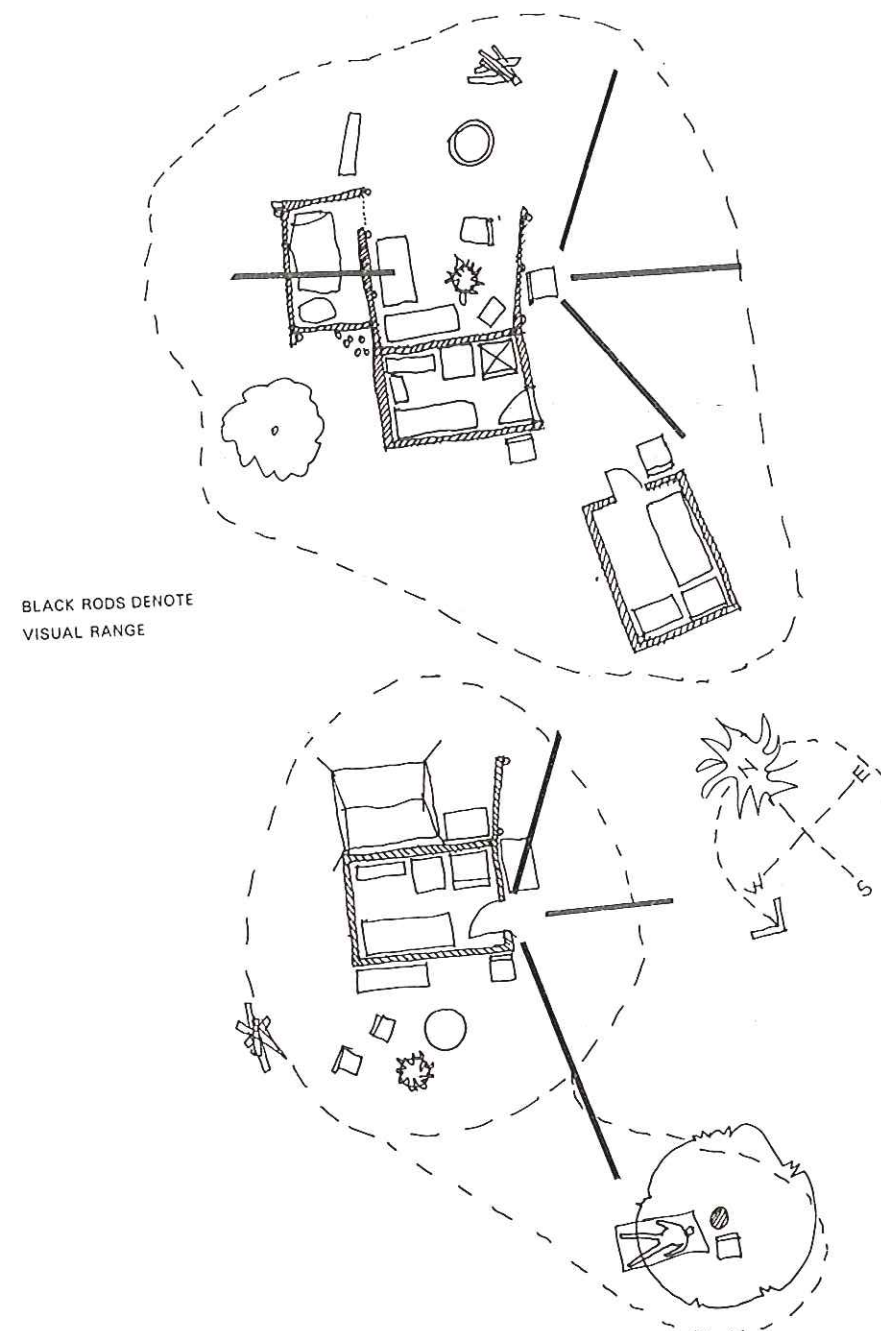


Fig.9 Camp layout after composition of households  
had changed

screened from the main Mt Nancy camp by a one-metre high galvanized iron windbreak. The windbreak allowed the couple to conduct their affairs out of sight of any inquiring eyes in the main Mt Nancy camp and was also screened from the places where the old man usually sat. To join the couple, the old man had first to pass along the windbreak, so they would get sufficient warning of any intended visit. The tent was even more private.

What seemed to have been established in this situation was two household camps operating within the ambit of one overall household camp. The result was a significant departure from traditional Aboriginal practices which appeared to have important implications for any house design. In the traditional setting, when a visitor remained at a camp, he would be allocated somewhere to camp by the leader of the group in residence (Stoll *et al.* 1979) and would remain there as an entirely separate household camp. Applying these practices to a housing development scheme, one could assume that visitors would not be accommodated in a person's house (out of preference) but in some separate location where he would set up his own living arrangements. In contrast, if visitors to a town camp expected to be put up by residents, then it was reasonable to assume that they would be accommodated in a host's house. As the town camps in Alice Springs provided a major service to visitors to Alice Springs in the sense of giving them somewhere to stay, the implications of this convention on the kind of housing which might be required, were great.

In the traditional setting, visitors were expected to maintain their own hearths and eat and sleep in the camp they had established. In contrast, the couple, when they first arrived, ate and generally remained around the fire of the old man. As the duration of their stay was extended, so the two households tended to perform more and more of their activities quite independently. The old man was the first to take the initiative by locating his hearth outside the door to the main shelter. It was not long after this that the metal framed bed was removed from the shelter. Hearth and bed were then gradually moved southwards.

The couple left Mt Nancy in April. Shortly after they left, another married couple, this time with one child, attached itself to the camp of the old man. When it became clear that they were going to stay for some time, the old man built a galvanized iron shelter for them which was an



extension to his shelter (for elevation, see Fig.8).

The advent of the second couple had little impact on the living arrangements of the old man. He continued to live and sleep in the open to the south of his camp. In early May, however, as the nights began to get colder, he acquired an old caravan and located it in the activity area which had served as his personal camp. He moved his hearth to the southwest of the main shelter so that it screened the hearth from the activity area of the couple.

Two household camps were thus consolidated into the one overall area. Both households maintained separate activity areas and, from all appearances, maintained separate households. The number of interactions between these two households was, however, much more frequent than between either of these households and other households living at Mt Nancy. Often the old man could be found sitting with the couple enjoying their company. He regularly had food cooked by them although he would usually take it back and eat it in his own activity area. He also always slept in his activity area, or, when the nights got cold, inside the caravan.

The physical features of this camp are represented in Fig.8. Of particular interest are the following:

- a) The caravan provides a marginal improvement, if any, over the original shelter constructed by the old man. With the caravan, however, the original shelter becomes a buffer between caravan and activity of the old man, and shelter and activity area of the married couple. Aural privacy was secure because conversations would not normally carry to the other camp. Had the original shelter been occupied, however, aural privacy would have been difficult for sound would have carried to the ears of anyone sitting on the other side of the wall.

The original shelter also maintained visual privacy between the two households. Neither could look directly into the activity area of the other without standing up and moving to some vantage point. The windbreak also enhanced this privacy by physically separating the two activity areas.

The caravan was located in such a way that the door to the original shelter could be observed from the doorway of the caravan. Similarly, a person sitting

in the doorway of the caravan could look across to the other household camps in the centre of Mt Nancy while they could not look directly into the caravan.

- b) Shortly after the installation of area lighting, an electrical extension cord was run to the shelter. With electricity, the householder bought a second-hand refrigerator and set up an electric light within the shelter and then in the caravan when that was acquired.
- c) The roof of the main shelter was used to store objects in general use such as cooking utensils and food either recently cooked or being prepared. There, they were kept out of reach of the camp dogs which are voracious and aggressive scavengers. On the roof of a building, food and utensils get more protection from dust than they would if kept on the ground and, in the case of utensils, have the benefit of a certain amount of sterilization from the sun.  
  
The roof was gabled and each householder used the side sloping towards his camp for storage.
- d) The roof of the shelter of a neighbouring camp, visible to anyone standing up in the activity area.
- e) A table set up in the activity area which was predominantly used to prepare food and store utensils about to be used for cooking.
- f) The inside of the humpy. Greater privacy can be obtained by retiring deeper inside the humpy.
- g) A car on the main Stuart Highway between Alice Springs and Darwin.
- h) Three fires close together are all used for different purposes. Two are cut from 44-gallon drums. One is used to boil water for washing clothes and individual ablutions. The second serves as a hot plate for cooking. The third is lit for its warmth and is a focus for social activities, especially after dusk.
- i) A windbreak of two horizontal galvanized iron sheets laid one above the other. It serves to screen the activity area from the main camp. It also extends the distance between the two household camps by requiring a person coming from the direction of the caravan to pass along it before being able to enter the other activity area.



- j) The padlocked door to the original shelter. The door is kept locked for security, the most important possession in the shelter being a refrigerator in which food and soft drinks are stored.

This small but integrated complex provided two quite distinct living areas. For privacy, both shelters were screened from the other's view and hearing by the intervening shelter which had come to be used for storage. All the residents, however, had an uninterrupted view of the main camp and the main road. They could see across to these places either by standing up in the activity area or, in the case of the caravan, simply by sitting in the doorway. Thus gossip, cooking, sleeping, playing and other social activities all occurred in a small area but without intruding one on the other.

The way this complex space was designed and utilized has few parallels in a conventional European house. In the latter, activities are expected to occur in separate rooms, each designed for a particular purpose. The scale of each room is largely defined for the purpose for which it is designed. Once the scale has been determined, it cannot be modified. A person then cannot perform a number of different tasks without moving from room to room. For example, cooking (for which a kitchen is provided) cannot be performed close to a group gossiping in the open, nor can the cook also supervise the laundry and bathe an infant. Even contemporary open plan designs require furniture to act as screens and create intimate spaces. Such spaces would be created within the confines of an enclosed room which, in the case of the two households under discussion, would represent a major difference in form and amenity. A conventional European house imposes a radically different set of living patterns from those of a traditional household camp. Its external walls further contribute to the different set of living patterns by insulating all households from each other and thus inhibiting their integration into one close visual and aural community.

The shelters at Mt Nancy were generally small. Figure 10 gives the plan of a cluster of three household camps living in close proximity to each other. They were located at the western end of Mt Nancy (Fig. 11) and were set up after there had been substantial relocations of shelters with the introduction of electricity into the camp and when the building of the ablution block was begun.

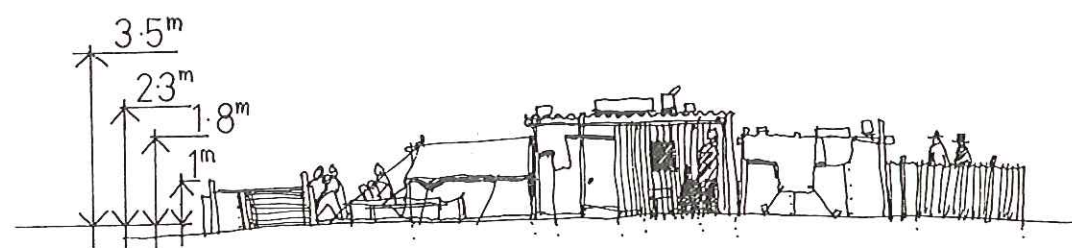
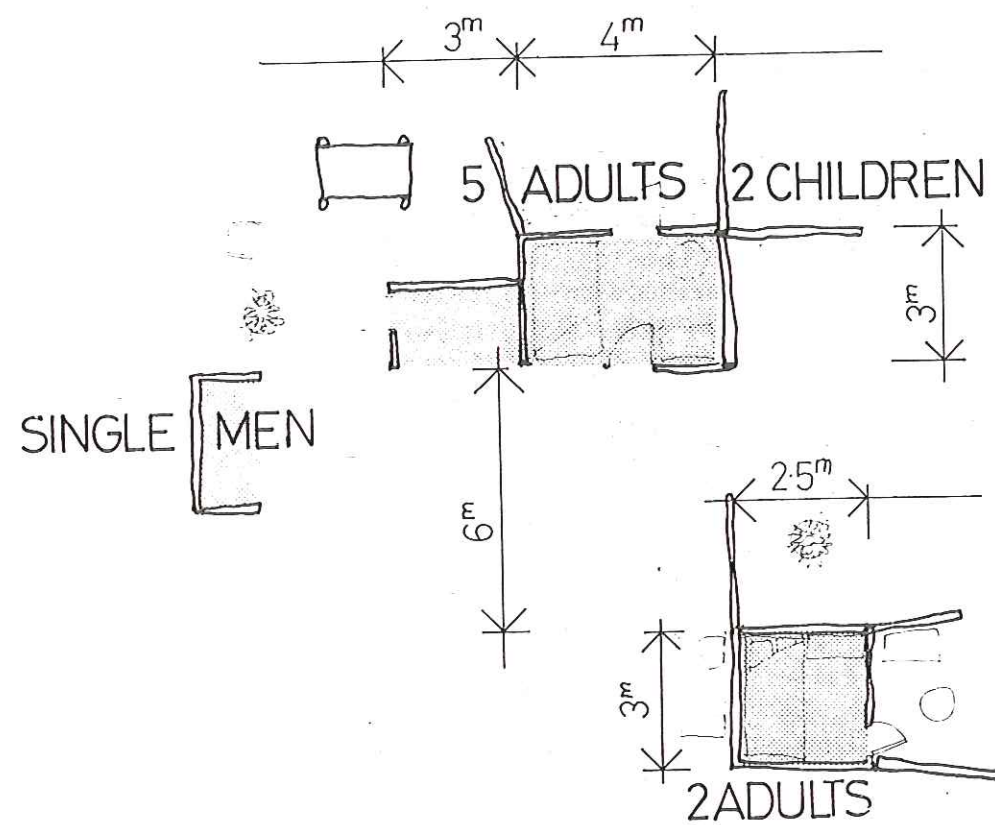


Fig.10 Plan of cluster of three household camps at Mt Nancy



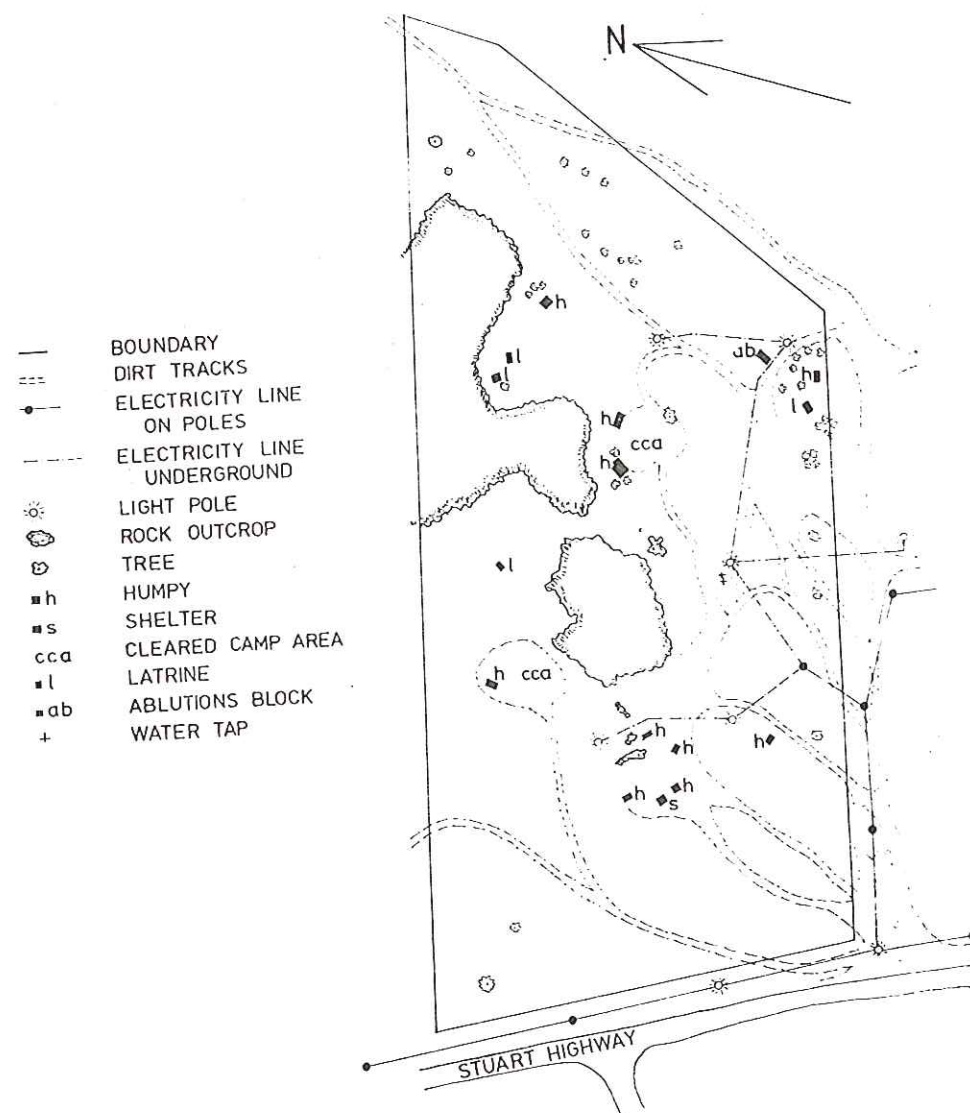
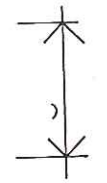


Fig.11 Relocation of camps after provision of area lighting and the beginning of the construction program

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M Nancy

The shelter of a family of five adults was a small 4m x 3m with living and activity areas a mere 77 sq.m. This shelter was about 6m away from an even smaller shelter of 3m x 2.5m which was occupied by a married couple. The arrangement of shelter and windbreaks in both these household camps allowed the members to orient their activities either towards or away from the other household. Even when oriented to each other, neither could look directly into the other's shelter.

Three visiting single men had also attached themselves to this cluster of household camps. They slept in a small area demarcated on three sides by galvanized iron windbreaks. They faced towards the other two households but were more closely identified both physically and socially with the larger household.

The scale of these camps is considerably smaller than even the smallest conventional house. Not only are the areas occupied much smaller; so also are the heights of the buildings and associated structures (see Fig.12 for comparisons). The height of the average windbreak is less than a metre and allows a sitting man to see over the top of it and beyond. The height of a shelter is usually up to about 1.8m, which allows things to be stored on the roof in easy reach of a standing person but safely out of the reach of scavenging dogs. This height means that most people stoop when inside a shelter. Aboriginal shelters are not built for people to stand inside. People use shelters to sleep in, to shelter in from rain and cold and to store belongings in. The major factors therefore in determining the height of a shelter are the size of the materials available, the construction of an area which can easily be kept warm and snug in winter with a small fire in the doorway and a roof height which permits the storage of food in reasonable safety from the camp dogs. Just as the way in which the area a household camp occupies has little correspondence with the internal arrangement of rooms within a conventional house, so the dimensions of a camp and the structures arranged within it bear little relationship to the minimum dimensions of a conventional house.

The descriptions of the physical arrangements of the two clusters of household camps at Mt Nancy should serve to illustrate how Aborigines (often unconsciously) relate their dwelling to the dwellings of others in their group. For a traditional Aboriginal, a dwelling only becomes meaningful



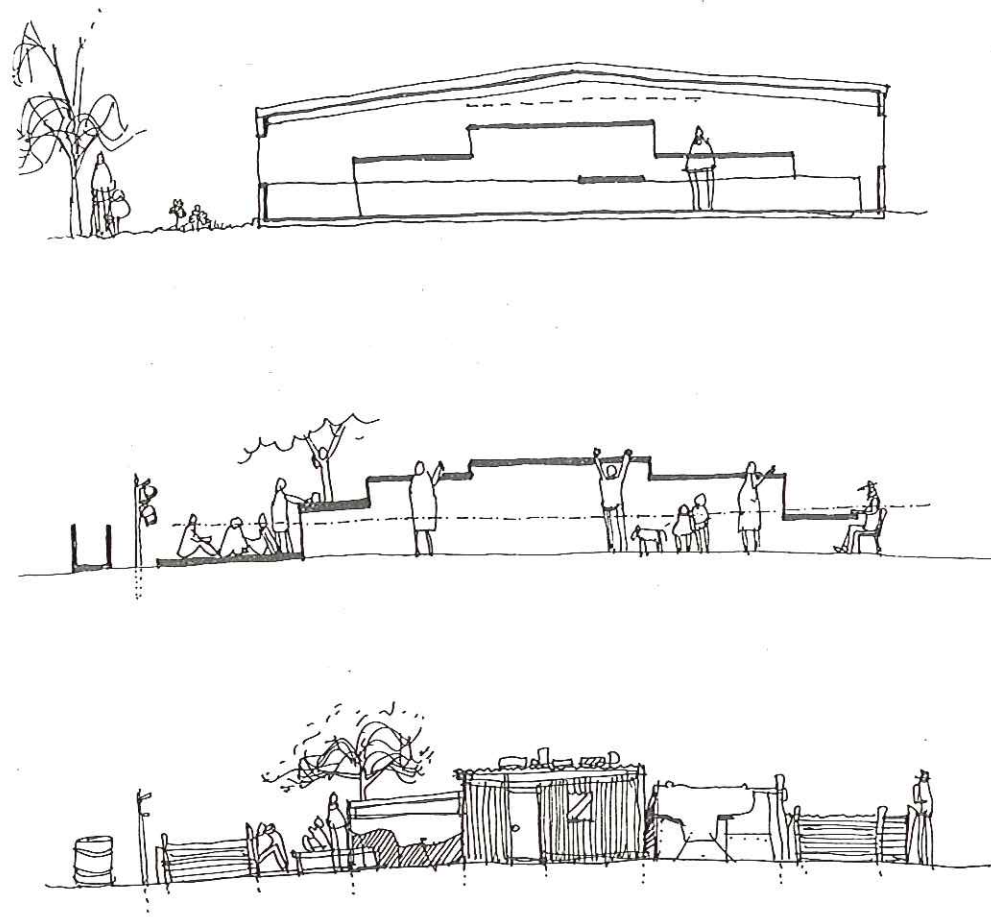


Fig.12 Comparison of size of a humpy and a conventional house

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when it is related to other dwellings in a camp. The form that the dwelling and surrounding activity area takes is defined by this relationship. In this context, conceptually a house is something totally different. It takes its form from the internal organization of rooms within its walls and not from any relationship it might have to other houses in a neighbourhood or the surroundings. In these differences, we get to the roots of the problem of consulting with Aborigines about suitable housing for them. Aborigines see their living arrangements as a statement of their relationships with other members of the group. Without first developing an understanding of the way in which an Aboriginal orders this part of his physical environment, an architect cannot critically evaluate the kinds of changes which must occur when an Aboriginal is removed from his familiar ordered environment and confined in a house. The process, in the simple sense of asking Aborigines what they want, is unfair on the latter for they are asked to do something which they do not have the conceptual equipment to do. They are in fact asked to order rooms in an internal arrangement for one household which presumes a set of functions and divisions about which they have no experience and which is foreign to their society. What in fact results is that two faces of ignorance meet to discuss not what each person knows (a person with knowledge of his own living patterns and requirements and a person with design ability) but to prepare something based on what each person does not know (ignorance of the form and function of a house with ignorance of the form and function of the patterns of behaviour). Not surprisingly, the results generally have been unsatisfactory.

Figure 13 illustrates the kinds of difficulties and disharmonies which can occur in such a simple process. The floor plan given at the bottom of the figure is the one worked out by the members of the two households occupying the caravan and adjacent areas described above. It has a number of weaknesses.

The first and most obvious differences between the living arrangements of the camp and the floor plan is that in the latter the two households sleep in adjacent rooms rather than on opposite sides of a complex. A number of consequences necessarily follow. The privacy of each household would suffer dramatically. In the camp, with the storage humpy acting as a buffer between the two households, there could be no covert eavesdropping. With only a wall separating two bedrooms, no matter how good the insulation might be,



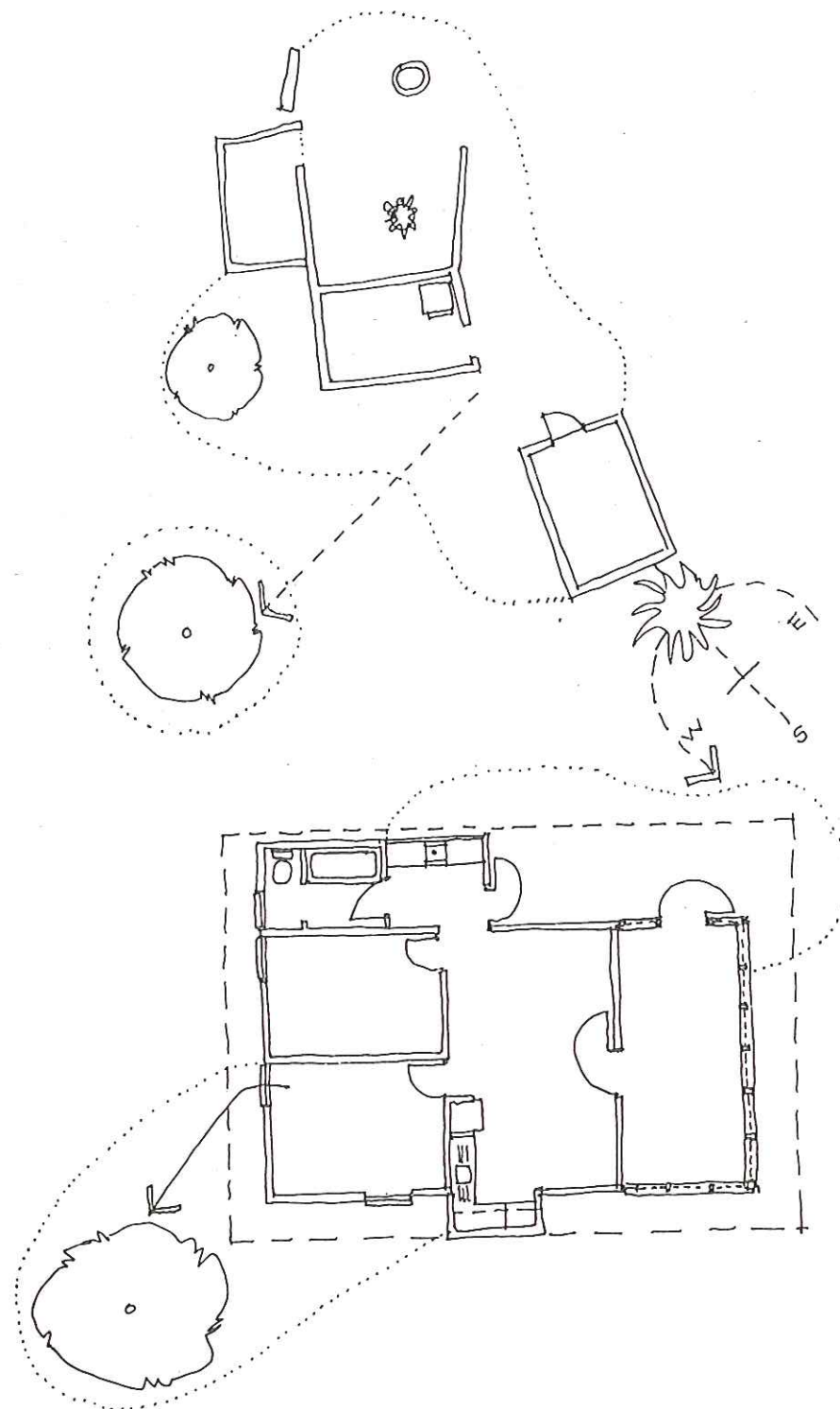


Fig.13 Traditional camp and proposed floor plan of house

traditional Aborigines fear that private conversations could be overheard. Such fears are inhibiting. Stoll *et al.* (1979:136, 140), for example, quoting informants, have reported how an Aboriginal feels in such a situation:

Well, my wife and I used to just stay there [in his house in Hermannsburg] without saying anything. Sometimes during the day when all the other people had gone to the shop or somewhere, that's the time we used to talk private business. When nobody else was around. If people didn't go away, we just used to sit without saying anything. There used to be a lot of arguments.

When people stay there [at the Lutheran Mission Block in Alice Springs] they feel embarrassed. They feel embarrassed to talk about their own stories (for example between husband and wife) because the people in the next room can hear.

Each bedroom opens to an internal living area in which the kitchen is located and beyond which is a flyscreened living area. Many social activities are bound to occur in these rooms, especially those concerned with the cooking and preparation of food. In wet weather and during winter most social activities would occur in these rooms. The one living area would present the two households with the problem of managing it so that it could be used without the separate activities of each household interfering with the other. In the old camp, each household occupied a completely distinct area. Exit from each of the living areas could be made into neutral space. A person could sit anywhere in his domain without becoming party to the social activities of the other household. Intrusion into an activity of the other household could only be made openly.

In the floor plan, in contrast, there are many potentially ambiguous spaces. The inner living area in certain circumstances could act as a barrier to access to bedrooms and egress from them. Where a social activity of one group is in progress, a member of the other household group might find it difficult and embarrassing to pass through the room to get into his bedroom or to leave it. Activities in the kitchen could also occasion similar feelings of embarrassment (not to mention the problems of responsibility for keeping it clean). For a group, knowledge that someone whom it did not want to join in the activity wants to pass through or



fears that he could be listening through the bedroom door could act as a serious inhibitor to easy conversation. The route to the bathroom, W.C. and kitchen confronts the residents with similar problems.

One of the most likely effects of these living arrangements would be to create tensions between the two households. To resolve them, they would have to devise radically new conventions relating to privacy (and this would have to be done immediately on moving in while the households would also be grappling with manifold other problems associated with coping with a completely strange environment).

A similar problem to the one confronting someone wanting to leave a bedroom would confront a visitor hoping to join a group in the living room. In the traditional setting, visitors would wait at a distance to be invited to join a group. Desire to join and invitation were both usually signalled visually. No such prior warnings are possible in the design of this house. Consequently, a visitor might suddenly arrive amongst a group or shout his desires and risk a public rebuttal or an unwilling acceptance. The latter procedure is markedly different from the giving of visual cues, for a call demands a vocal reply. Until conventions are accepted which enable replies to be given without at the same time giving offence such procedures run a serious risk of contributing to misunderstandings and unnecessary tensions between people.

The relationship between the inner and outer living areas was also not satisfactory. They are too close together for two unrelated activities to occur concurrently. The activities in one would almost certainly be bound to intrude into the other. What would probably happen in practice would be for the inner living area to become a sort of passageway mediating the space between the bedrooms and the outer living area and small verandah.

Another important difference between the floor plan and the camp is in the restrictions which the house imposed on anyone seeing out. The inner living area has no windows at all and the bedrooms only have small windows. Aural deprivation of activities occurring in Mt Nancy would also be enhanced by the absence of windows or big windows.

The orientation of the house also contributes to the visual deprivation. The main road between Alice Springs and Darwin (which would pass on a west/east axis behind the house) cannot be seen from inside the house except perhaps from the bedroom windows while the rest of Mt Nancy could only be seen by people sitting on the verandah. Anyone in the kitchen would be unable to monitor activities in the main camp. For a woman with young children, for example, such visual deprivation could elicit great anxiety.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance to an Aboriginal of being able to see, hear and generally 'feel' the happenings in his camp. Much of the monitoring is done at an unconscious level. So long as there is normality, a person is not aroused. As soon as there is an untoward or unfamiliar cue, however, a person's senses are alerted and he will seek an explanation.<sup>1</sup> In any Aboriginal camp people frequently survey the scene as a matter of course. In Mt Nancy, for example, the road is an important focus of attention so that people can learn who is in town. The entrance to the camp is similarly of interest as people like to know who is entering the camp. This interest was particularly important when the camp was visited by drunks, tourists and individuals and gangs intent on harassment. Internally, knowledge of domestic situations and inter and intra familial relationships and alliances is most important if a resident is to observe the social decorums and not give gratuitous or unwitting offence. In emergencies, such as illness or disputes, quick and appropriate responses are most important and can lead to the saving of lives. Even when everything appears outwardly normal, Aborigines quickly spot when things are not as they should be. If parents are absent, for example, when young children return from school, arrangements are quickly made for someone else to look after them. In times of adversity, when a family has no money to purchase provisions, an unlit cooking fire and children crying out of hunger, the situation would quickly be noticed. Kinsmen would come to their aid. If the family were in a house, however, many of these happenings might pass unnoticed for some considerable time.

In order to obtain more precise data about the importance to an Aboriginal of being privy to various kinds of visual

<sup>1</sup>For a discussion of the importance of information flow to an Aboriginal, see Reser (1979).



and aural information, one would have to study the changes which occurred after he had been deprived of the flows. In terms of the design process at Mt Nancy, such a course of action was clearly impossible (as well as being undesirable). An important design assumption, therefore, was to enable occupants of houses to minimize the inhibition of information flow.

Each of the other floor plans designed by Mt Nancy households was subject to the same comparative analysis between observed living patterns and constraints imposed by the floor plan. The constraints were then discussed with each household. This process of feedback and increased understanding on the part of many of the households of the kinds of limitations imposed by a house resulted in a number of refinements and in some cases extensive modifications to their floor plans. In the case of the household group discussed in this chapter, it resulted in a decision by the old man that he would prefer to live in his caravan and have that related to the house in which the young couple would live.

The process also contributed to the community's assurance that their development scheme was being tailored to their own requirements and that knowledge of these requirements was being demonstrated by the architect. They therefore set the scene for a detailed interest in the form that the housing took being displayed by almost all the households in the camp.

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## Chapter 10

### Design synthesis

For Mt Nancy, good housing would make an important statement to the rest of Alice Springs. It would assert that members of the community, despite their different circumstances, were the equals of other citizens in Alice Springs and that they conformed to the expectations of the wider Alice Springs community, while pursuing their own particular interests. The conformity in part would be expressed by houses of conventional appearance. The statement was an accommodating one and can be understood in the context of the years of criticism and abuse that the community had suffered as town campers about their living standards, appearance and behaviour not measuring up to the standards demanded by the township and the basic feeling of insecurity felt by every town camper about his ability to remain. The statement, in fact, was a reflection of the town campers' own opinion about where lay the locus of power to determine good taste in the township.

A second important consideration for the members of Mt Nancy was that the houses provide comfortable living conditions throughout the year. Spaces should be easily heated during cold spells and there should be areas in which people could escape from the wet. It might seem somewhat commonplace to stress the importance of a house being weatherproof, but for Aborigines in Centralia in 1975, many houses built for them did not measure up to these expected standards. Roofs, through design faults, leaked, water flowed into the body of a house under doors and even, sometimes (e.g. in the Charles River houses), under walls, and rain blew in through window areas which in conventional houses would be glassed. As Aborigines usually had little furniture, most of their belongings were stored on the floor and in wet weather became saturated even when well inside a house.

Shaded, sheltered areas were also required so that people could comfortably sit outside during hot spells and could shelter from or take advantage of cool breezes.



For Wigley, on the basis of his understanding of the living patterns of the group, it was important to balance internal and external living areas in the design so that households could continue to live around a house and within the community rather than inside it excluded from the community. At this early stage in the design process, both the community and Wigley considered that extensive covered areas around the outside walls of the house would enable the occupants to orient their activities with reference to the remainder of the community whilst, at the same time, taking advantage of the various kinds of shelter the roof and walls provided.

From his observations of the changes in composition of household groups at Mt Nancy, as well as his expectation that as households became more accustomed to living in a house, so their living patterns would change, Wigley decided that it was important to design a structure which could readily be extended or modified as the perceived requirements of the occupants changed.

There were other reasons for an 'open ended' design approach. The Panel recognized that it was neither politically nor economically feasible to tailor houses to the individual requirements of every household in a community. For one thing, the Panel considered that one of its principal objectives was to develop prototype design approaches which would be found suitable for Aborigines living in a general area (for example, the Central Desert).

Wigley recognized that a basic design had to accommodate a range of different requirements, from those of traditional pensioners who could not be expected to make many changes to their living patterns, to those of households which had already experienced living in Housing Commission housing, and eventually to those of the children who had been brought up within the township, had been educated by Europeans at European schools and who could be expected to seek conventional employment within the township.

Wigley also expected that, through time, living patterns would change as people developed a lifestyle focused more on their own house than on the camp as a whole. The form that these changes might take was difficult to predict. Similarly, changes in family composition for people intent on living in a small camp would have different implications for the residents than they would for residents of a European suburb.

For example, the normal response of a European family to an expanding family is to seek a bigger house or to have expensive additions to one's own house. Neither of these alternatives was practicable at Mt Nancy. There was little likelihood that, in a community of eleven households, as one family expanded another would reduce correspondingly. Secondly the ability of Mt Nancy households to seek extensions to their houses, given the poor economic prospects of Aborigines, seemed slender.

A further consideration was that, in time, the houses of the pensioners (the people with the simplest requirements for shelter) would be taken over by young families which had grown up entirely in Alice Springs and whose values were more heavily influenced by Europeans than were those of the pensioners. Indeed, the possibility could not be ignored that all the houses would eventually be occupied by families whose living patterns were heavily influenced by white Australian values.

There was a danger in the above considerations. They were based on an assumption that, with a house, Mt Nancy residents would generally tend to live more like white Australians. The trends or developments were all in this one direction, a direction with which the township fathers would have heartily approved. A house, therefore, could be an important factor in accelerating and contributing to these trends. There were other possibilities which had to be recognized and allowed for in a design. The most important one was that, with the increasing self-confidence of the Mt Nancy community, a particularly Aboriginal settlement and house utilization would be developed. The designs therefore should not inhibit the possibility of modifications of a specifically Aboriginal kind. The problem for the architect was, with a total absence of any information about the direction such developments might take, to make allowances for them.

Before proceeding to a design, certain constraints were determined. The houses were to be low cost but in line with the Hay Inquiry's recommendations (Hay 1976) that Aborigines be given access to housing on terms no less favourable than Housing Commission terms in rural areas. In Alice Springs the Housing Commission in 1976 had let a contract for thirty-six three-bedroom houses for an approximate \$27,000 per



house.<sup>2</sup> Given the difference in scale and the inflation of building costs which had occurred since that date, a target of \$30,000 a house was set for Mt Nancy. It was also decided that the houses were to be low maintenance. As the Mt Nancy community wanted a brick clad house, one solution to the requirement for low maintenance was to have internally unlined brick walls, a solution which the Mt Nancy community heartily approved.

The Mt Nancy community had categorically stated that it did not want to build its own houses. For one thing, its most reliable workers were fully employed or were expecting to get work on cattle stations, work which they enjoyed and which gave them status amongst other Aborigines. Secondly, the community wanted the houses to be built as quickly as possible with a minimum of disruption to relationships within the camp. For the community, use of contractors was most likely to meet these requirements.

A decision was also made about the extent of internal fittings to be provided in the houses. Evidence from housing programs in Aboriginal settlements in central Australia all pointed to the need to provide ample storage space out of reach of young children and dogs. Elsewhere, Aborigines would simply transfer their suitcases, cooking utensils and flour bins from humpy floor to house floor where they would be open to the same unhygienic hazards as before. It was therefore decided to provide as much storage as possible as built-in fittings and free the floors for living rather than storage purposes.

Turning to more detailed aspects of the design, one important criterion was to try to create some fluidity between outside and internal spaces so that households would still be able to orient their activities in relation to other households in the camp. Ample verandahs were the medium by which this was to be accomplished. They would provide ample shaded space beyond the walls of a house in which various activities could take place. They would allow occupants to experiment with additional enclosed spaces simply by closing off parts of the verandah. Later, as ideas crystallized, a house could be extended under verandah roof in ways which the occupants already knew would be suitable. Verandahs would also provide spaces in which the many visitors to Mt

<sup>2</sup>DAA 1976 Review of Housing Association Scheme, internal report. The two contracts for eight houses at Mt Nancy came to \$240,000.

Nancy could be accommodated. According to the Mt Nancy community, deep verandahs would relieve a host from being obliged to put up visitors in his house and the attendant risks and dislocation that that might cause. For example, a widower living in a Housing Commission house in Alice Springs copes with visitors as follows:

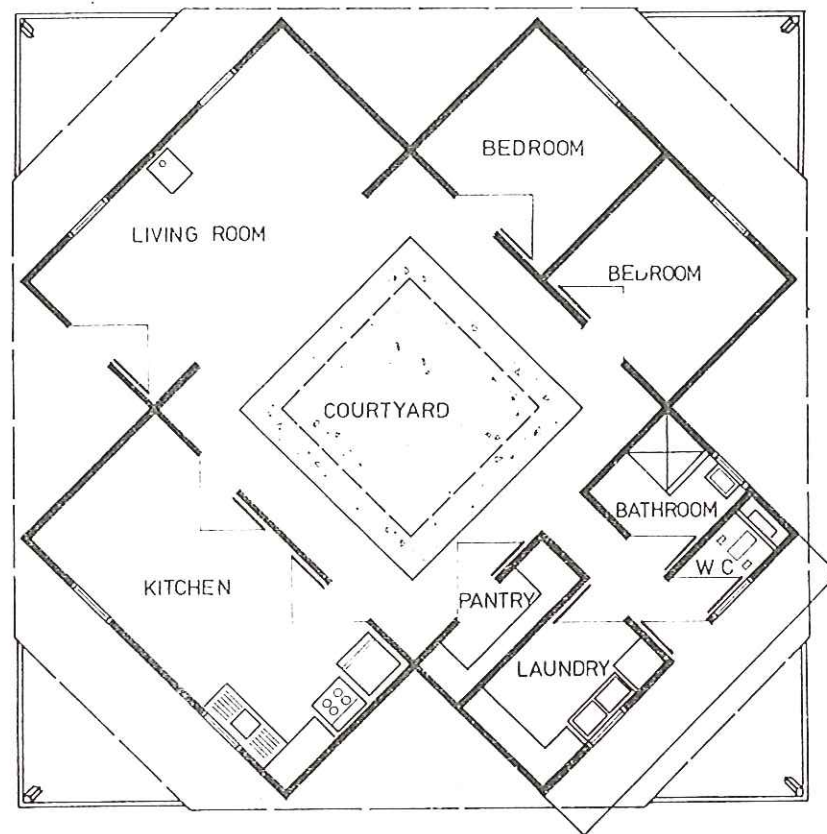
Sometimes, when a husband and wife come with a lot of children to stay with him, he shifts out of his bedroom to the big room (kitchen/lounge). That's where he sleeps with all the boys. If more women come, then he shifts into another room. Then he has only a few of the big boys to sleep with him in that room. He can't put them in with the women. When they go, he goes back to his room with the boys ... That really pushes him around all the time (Stoll *et al.* 1979:141).

In his initial thinking Wigley considered the blurring of boundaries between inside and outside to be the most important design criterion. Accordingly, he decided to incorporate verandahs of different shapes and sizes around each house and have them leading directly into rooms. This approach did not meet with the general approval of the community. People stressed the need for privacy in certain parts of a house. Wigley therefore amended his design approach so that it would provide deeper levels of privacy within a house. For example, an inner living room would be accessible to visitors and other members of the community but would not be visible to the camp in general. Bedrooms located deeper inside a house would be havens into which a household could retire out of reach of other members of the community.

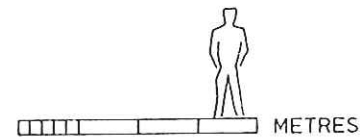
Cooking, for Aborigines, is usually not divorced from other social activities. Many architects, in their designs for Aborigines, have demonstrated a lack of understanding of the social component of cooking. In many house designs, kitchens are placed deep inside houses where gossip groups are not likely to congregate (see, for example, Fig.14). At Mt Nancy, much of the cooking could be expected to be performed outside on fires lit on or beyond a verandah. For these activities, ease of access to the kitchen would be required both for utensils and for food stored there.

Much casual eating is done by Aborigines. A person feels hungry; so he gets himself something to eat. In such





HOUSE TYPE 'A'  
WILLOWRA MARCH 1974



#### AREA

TOTAL AREA: DWELLING + COURTYARD:	107.0 m <sup>2</sup>
COURTYARD:	34.8 m <sup>2</sup>
DWELLING:	72.2 m <sup>2</sup>

#### CONSTRUCTION

ROOF: METAL SHEETING

WALLS: TIMBER FRAME

EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL LINING: 'HARDIFLEX' SHEETING

FLOOR: CONCRETE SLAB ON GROUND

DESIGNED BY ANDREW MCPHEE AND ASSOCIATES PTY LTD ARCHITECTS

Fig.14 Example of a house design with kitchen deep inside the house

circumstances the proximity of kitchen to where most activities were likely to occur would be important, so that the person in search of food would not have to disengage himself totally from an activity. There was, however, a rub. People did not want the kitchen, or at least food storage areas such as refrigerator and pantry, to be too accessible because of fears that visitors and non-residents would take advantage of them and help themselves to whatever they wanted.

The ablutions area places an important constraint on the development of a house design, for bedrooms tend to be related to them. One important criterion for the location of the ablutions area was that it should not impede any future extensions. It was decided to locate the ablutions away from the kitchen, largely because of the strongly expressed concern of a number of Mt Nancy residents that dirty water from blocked drains would not flow back into the kitchen area.

Room sizes are important elements in any house design. Houses designed for Aborigines have generally had rooms of conventional size. Bedrooms for example are generally of the order of 3.6m x 3.6m to 3.6m x 4.5m. Scant regard has been paid by architects to the dimensions that Aborigines might find comfortable. Aboriginal perceptions of comfortable internal spaces have undoubtedly been influenced by experience, which, in turn, has been constrained by the materials available. With the materials available in the desert it would have been difficult to construct a large dwelling. Scrap materials used by town campers have similar limitations. At Mt Nancy, most shelters were of the order of 2m x 2m although one of 4m x 3m had been constructed. Aborigines, therefore, could be expected to find small enclosed spaces comfortable for sleeping or sheltering from inclement weather which, in part, might explain why, when conventional sized rooms have been constructed where there are acute housing shortages, pressures build up on Aboriginal households to convert rooms to multiple occupancy. Aborigines simply perceive a conventional sized room to be in excess of the requirements of one household. In light of these considerations, Wigley decided to design rooms the size of which appeared familiar to the occupants. If their perception of what constituted a comfortable sized room were enlarged, the rooms could be extended. The alternative of designing conventional sized rooms was regarded as forcing families to adapt to the bigger dimensions and run the risk of pressures developing of putting the rooms to uses other than what were planned. Accordingly, bedrooms were planned to have roughly the same floor areas

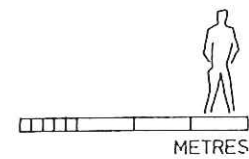
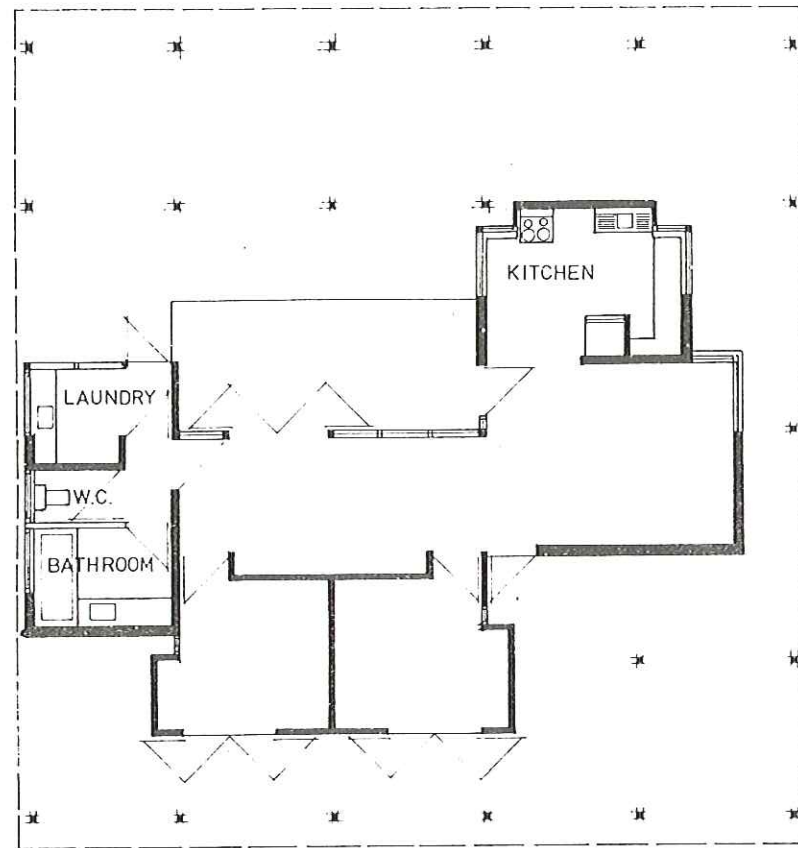


as the humpies at Mt Nancy (about 2.1m x 2.7m).

Because of the way Aborigines regard private and public business, good acoustics were considered to be an important design feature. This was particularly so because, from an economic point of view, the location of bedrooms to adjoin one another was unavoidable. It was therefore desirable to make the occupants of the rooms feel confident that conversations could not be overheard in a neighbouring room. Surfaces which tended to mute noises were therefore considered preferable to those which did not.

The point had been reached to proceed to detailed designs. There could be no doubt of the keenness of the Mt Nancy community for the housing program to begin. Given their aspirations, almost any conventional house would probably have done. Wigley was concerned to temper these demands because one of the Panel's purposes was to establish certain principles about designing housing for remote Aborigines. The Panel wanted a small number of prototype houses to be built initially to test out its architects' ideas, to make sure that any bugs in a design were eliminated and to give the initial occupants an opportunity to experiment with the house and by a process of feedback and refinement to modify a design so that when a large-scale housing program got under way, there could be confidence that the designs were as satisfactory as they could be. The period of experimentation, discussion and refinement was also important because Wigley was only too aware of the number of untested assumptions inherent in his design approach.

It was decided initially to build three prototypes. With that decision agreed by the community, intensive discussions were held with the three households for whom the prototypes were to be built (see Appendix III for the floor plans they had designed). A basic 'core house' was developed in which the two elements, bathroom/laundry/W.C. and kitchen could be located in various configurations under a general roof area. Initially, only two combinations were used, one of which located the two core areas on opposite sides of the house (Fig.15) and the other in a central area. These core areas were located under an extensive roof area supported by columns. The columns were designed to serve as posts to which extempore screens could be attached to sub-divide rooms and, in large areas, as a device visually to break up the expanse into a more comfortable area.



#### AREA

TOTAL AREA UNDER ROOF 182.25 m<sup>2</sup>

#### CONSTRUCTION

STRUCTURE	TIMBER COLUMNS, TIMBER AND STEEL ROOF FRAME
ROOF	METAL SHEETING
WALLS	CONCRETE BLOCKWORK, TIMBER STUD FRAME
FLOOR	CONCRETE SLAB ON GROUND

DESIGNED BY ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER  
HOUSING PANEL INC.

Fig.15 Core house, Mt Nancy



The laundry, W.C. and bathroom were located (Fig.15) at the outer edge of the house to provide a warm sheltered area in the morning. These rooms were located on the east of the house as Mt Nancy people preferred to take a shower first thing in the morning. With the sun's rays falling on the room, it was felt that, perceptually, even in winter, the rooms would give an appearance of warmth. The laundry leads out northwards where clothes lines would obtain a maximum benefit from the sun.

The kitchen is located on the other side of the house following the requirement that kitchen and ablutions area be separated. Being a source of heat, it is also separated from the bedrooms and its three external walls serve as a bank to radiate heat outside.

This core house was then developed in close consultation with the household which had traced out floor plan 1 in Appendix III. In its initial floor plan, the household had designated three bedrooms. On reflection, with two infants, the household decided that two bedrooms would be preferable as a third might encourage visitors to demand to stay in a room which was not being occupied by the household.

In the house under discussion, the deep verandah facing south towards the main gate into Mt Nancy (see Fig.16 for location of the core house) and towards the centre of the camp was expected to fulfil the same functions as an activity area in a traditional camp. There was easy access from the verandah into the kitchen. The verandah led into a more secluded area which was designed to mediate between outside and inside. In particular, extensive shelving was provided in the room so that items of general use could be stored securely there. Beyond this area were the two bedrooms and a living room which led directly on to the verandah facing northwest.

An important design principle at Mt Nancy was to provide different levels of seclusion for its occupants. As Chapter 9 has described, in a traditional camp almost all activities occur in the open in public view of the rest of the camp. According to traditional values, any person or family which conducted most of its affairs in private had something to hide and therefore was regarded as being up to no good. There were occasions when privacy was sought. Sacred business is one example, but that usually took place away from a general camp and therefore had no implications for housing

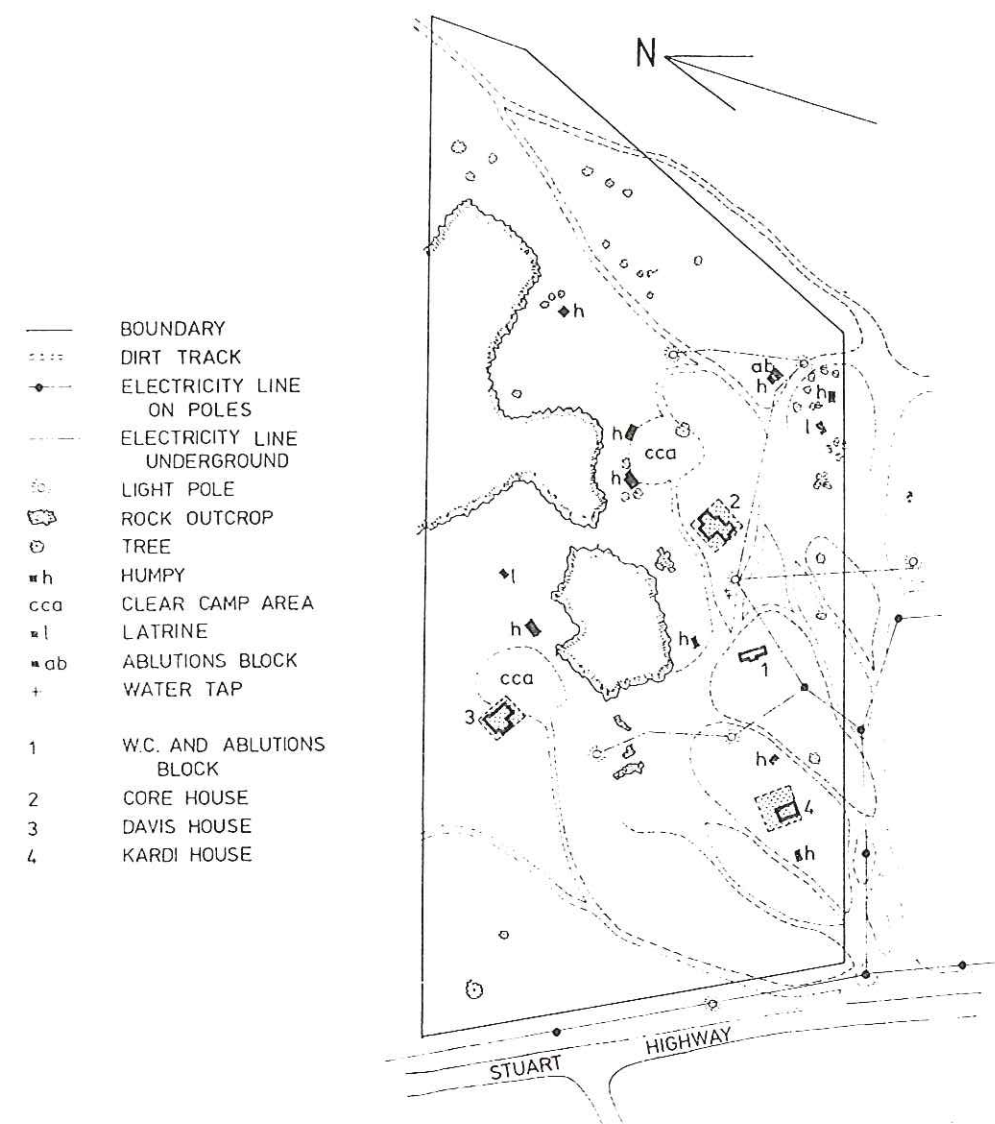


Fig.16 Mt Nancy after the addition of the ablution block and three prototype houses



designs nor for camp (town) plans. Another example is when a man and wife had personal business to discuss or some other transaction to perform which they did not want to be done publicly. In such cases they would simply withdraw into their dwelling, an action which indicated to the rest of the camp that they did not want to be interrupted. There were other occasions of a personal kind when individuals simply wanted to be alone and out of public view, and again the dwelling provided such a haven.

A house greatly expands the covered area in which social activities can occur. This facility is particularly noticeable in inclement weather. On such occasions, in a traditional camp, all social activities cease while shelter is sought, for most Aboriginal shelters only provide enough room for a household group to huddle together. A house, on the other hand, provides the kind of space which permits social activities to continue without dislocation even during a heavy rainstorm. Unfortunately, architects generally have not taken advantage of the opportunities offered by housing to allow social activities to continue 'outside' (i.e. on verandahs) during rainstorms. Many houses designed for Aborigines only have shallow verandahs (see Fig.14) or no verandahs at all. Apart from providing inadequate shade at certain times of the day, such houses provide inadequate protection from rain.

The requirement for easy access between inside and outside created some problems. One is worth considering in detail here. There are six external doors. Three of these are double doors. Security, clearly, could become a serious problem. The problem was partly resolved by having one key to fit all the locks.

Bedrooms, however, still created unease. The two bedrooms were situated at the rear of the house and looked out to a rocky knoll on which no building was feasible. Double doors led from the bedrooms to a shallow verandah and the idea was that occupants would be able to drag their beds and bedding out on to the verandah whenever they wanted to sleep outside and stow them away in the bedroom during the day. After people had moved into the house, there were tales of door handles being rattled in the night. There were also fears that the doors might be used by malevolent spirits to gain access. As these doors were provided only for access out of the bedrooms, it was decided that the external door handles were redundant and they were removed.

A second problem with doors is that they create draughts. In below freezing conditions, draughts are unwelcome. In all central Australian Aboriginal housing schemes examined by the Panel, houses were handed over to their Aboriginal occupants with bare concrete floors. And so they remained. And without furniture, that was where the occupants slept. Even in the rare houses with heating appliances, Aborigines frequently complained of the difficulties of keeping warm, especially as the vast majority slept on the floor. There have been a number of reported instances of Aborigines temporarily abandoning their houses on cold winter nights for the relative warmth of sleeping by a camp fire in the open because of their inability to keep warm inside (Heppell 1977). As none of the members of Mt Nancy would have been able to afford carpeting, to reduce draughts and noise and to give the inside of the houses a more comfortable appearance it was decided to specify durable industrial carpeting as a standard fitting in the houses.

The kitchens were also fitted according to Aboriginal requirements. For example, no low level cupboards were provided in recognition of the fact that any object which was not locked in a suitcase or secured in a flour bin was stored for safety out of the reach of dogs and young children. The spaces under the work benches were left unshelved as storage areas for flour bins, locked suitcases, boxes and any other receptacles the householders might use to store things in. Cupboards were provided above the work benches from which were suspended wire baskets for cutlery. The latter were provided as drawers in Aboriginal housing tended to become infested with cockroaches. Wire baskets would not, and consequently would provide a better level of hygiene in the kitchen.

Wood burning stoves, as originally requested, were not installed in the kitchens. On reflection, the Mt Nancy community decided they would initially continue to cook most food on open fires outside. Electric stoves installed in the kitchen would give them a quick, clean alternative for cooking food and especially for boiling a billy.

Given the deep verandahs, the problem that the central rooms would be rather gloomy was overcome by having a skylight above the general living area of the house. A skylight had the advantage of also acting as a vent, and thus increasing the flow of air through the house and drawing out hot air in the summer. The skylight was also designed in such a way

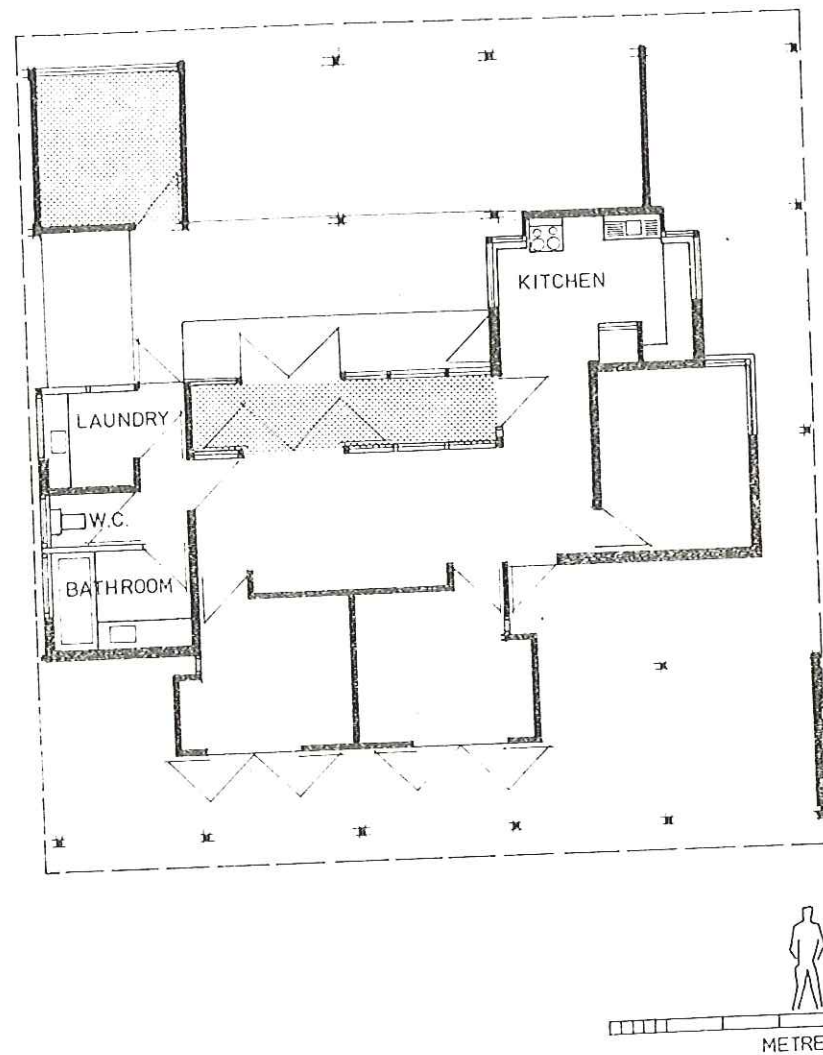


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WALLS CONCRETE BLOCKWORK,  
TIMBER STUD FRAME  
FLOOR CONCRETE SLAB ON GROUND

DESIGNED BY ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER  
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Fig.17 Core house, Mt Nancy, with modifications

that a solar heat bank could be incorporated into it once the relevant technology had been developed into a commercial proposition.

With the basic configuration of rooms of the prototypes agreed and detailed fittings specified, there only remained the problem of obtaining finance to build three prototypes to be used as experimental test beds. Funding of this program was a head office responsibility of the DAA. While the Panel had received thoughtful encouragement and support from Huey and the Alice Springs office of the DAA, the head office in late 1976 was no longer an organization interested in exploring new approaches to community development. The liberalizing era of the Council for Aboriginal Affairs was over. The DAA since its inception had been accident prone and had often received strident and wholly unsympathetic attention from the news media. Adverse reports by the Auditor-General, the Public Accounts Committee and Hay had resulted in a department more concerned about protecting itself and taking no risks than with grappling with the exciting but risky demands of small-scale development programs. Administrators with very little sympathy for and understanding of Aborigines and development planning were beginning to wield power within the department. For the Panel, this change in emphasis had major implications. Hay in his (for the Department, authoritative) report had taken the Panel to task for, according to him, dissipating its energies by becoming involved in 'planning renovations, public utilities, town design and housing, not all of which directly apply to other communities' (Hay 1976:72). The thrust of Hay's recommendations about the Panel was that it should be striving to determine a set of standardized designs which could be adopted for Aboriginal communities and which would result in potential savings. For the administrators within the DAA (not to mention the new Minister, Ian Viner), Hay's narrow charter for the Panel became directive and unmodifiable. Therefore, it was most likely that the head office of the DAA would not view sympathetically the idea of the Panel constructing prototypes for Aborigines to use as a development tool.

Application for funds was made in December 1976. On 1 April 1977, the DAA informed the Panel that a sum of \$109,000 was to be made available, but included in that amount was a figure of \$50,000 already allocated to Mt Nancy for the 1976-77 financial year. The Panel pointed out that much of the \$50,000 had already been spent by the community on a



toilet block, fencing, area lighting and on the provision of other amenities for the community. It also pointed out that construction had already begun on the houses (on the strength of the verbal advice that the money would be forthcoming).<sup>3</sup> The DAA replied reiterating its position and pointing out that some of the items on which money had been spent should have been drawn against the allocation for town management and public utilities<sup>4</sup> (which was very instructive, but as it was the DAA which made the drawings and should have drawn the money against the proper head, it did not help the Panel). Finally the Panel turned to the Alice Springs office, which made the money available and the program was able to go ahead.

Under the sympathetic eye of the DAA Alice Springs office, the construction period was used further to modify the design. Figure 17 shows the core house as it was finally developed for the household. The modifications were made after construction was reasonably well advanced, by which time a good appreciation of the dimensions of the house and the amenities it offered had been obtained. They demonstrated the importance of treating the first prototype as a developmental tool.

Two of the modifications were small. A small internal wall was added to divide the two living areas and give the occupants stricter security over what was to become a private living room. The security was required so that a refrigerator could be located there and the household's provisions could be kept out of sight of visitors.

Closing off this area changed the use of the general room. It came to be used for the storage of things in general use and enabled visitors and occupants alike to use it relatively freely. It was also used as an overflow area for overnight visitors.

The different light levels in these two rooms contributed to the occupants' perception of their different uses. According to the occupants, the inner room was darker, which added to its feeling of seclusion. The lightness and airiness of the other contributed to its more public uses.

<sup>3</sup>M. Heppell to G. Stern, 17 May 1977: correspondence, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Housing Panel, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.

<sup>4</sup>G. Stern to M. Heppell, 1 June 1977: as note 3.

A second modification was the construction of a half screen slatted wall to act as a windbreak on the south verandah. This windbreak blocked the view from the centre of Mt Nancy into the verandah while permitting people there to look across to the centre of the camp by peering through the slats. The windbreak did seem to add to the perceptual privacy of this area, for, after its completion, articles such as tape recorders and food and drink were left there unattended.

The third modification was the addition of a detached room on the verandah to provide a spare room for visitors completely separate from the house proper. Two potential dwellings were thus created under the same roof line which, in concept, were similar to the 'twin' household camp described in the previous chapter.

One of the principal requirements of the occupants of this house was privacy. Even with the additions to the deep southern verandah, the house remained a central point for the Mt Nancy community, especially after a telephone had been installed in it. For most of the day, the verandah was used as a meeting place for men and women. This was not welcomed by the occupants and, to reduce the desirability of the house for everyone else, they filled in this verandah.

Both bedrooms, as requested, had full-length clear glass windows. For the occupants, these windows exposed them too much to the view of people outside. Rather than purchase curtains, they glued a coloured translucent paper across the middle third of each window which increased the feeling of privacy within. At night the area lighting provided sufficient light for people to move around and get belongings without having to turn on a light. Breaking up the darkness was also important for the young children who slept in the room. Hitherto, young children always slept with their parents either outside by a camp fire (giving a similar kind of light as that penetrating into the room from the area lighting) or inside a humpy. If they woke up alarmed, the parents were beside them and immediately available to reassure them. In the house, the children were expected to sleep in a separate bedroom. The parents feared that children awakening in a pitch black room might become terrified while, if they were able to make out familiar forms, their disquiet would be less intense.



A second prototype was designed as a two-bedroom house for the household which had designed floor plan 2 in Appendix III. The principal requirement of this household was that it face the Kardi house (see Fig.16). The house consisted of a front verandah facing the Kardi house, a private rear verandah, an enlarged kitchen, an open fly-screened living area and two bedrooms.

The kitchen/living area had an 'island' set of kitchen work benches which were intended to serve as an occasional table and in part to test how the household would adapt to a small inner living area. The 'island' furniture was not a success, being regarded as an obstacle to free movement around the room and unnecessarily restricting the floor space provided to a number of passageways.

The size of this house was restricted because of uncertainties about the amount of funding which the DAA would make available for the project. The restrictions proved fortuitous, because, of the three prototypes, this design proved most popular largely because of its compactness. The women in particular preferred it to the larger prototypes, indicating a preference for smaller houses on the basis that they were easier to clean. This floor plan was adopted by other households in Mt Nancy and later by the neighbouring Warlpiri group at Ilibilili Tjatja.

The use of the third prototype proved most interesting. When construction began, a single women's camp had formed around the household which had designed floor plan 3 in Appendix III. With such a radical change to the composition of this household, and as membership was expected to change frequently, the ability to reorganize the enclosed spaces in relation to the service core was regarded as important. It was therefore decided initially to leave the area between the kitchen and enclosed rooms as unencumbered as possible. It was hoped that as the single women became more accustomed to the location of the core area in relation to the covered verandah space and worked out their own solutions to the management problems of adapting a single women's camp within the confines of a house, they would become more certain about the most appropriate location for any rooms required.

Shortly after the roof of this house had been erected, Alice Springs experienced a number of downpours. During the first, a group of four single women moved under the roof accompanied by one unwelcome male visitor to Mt Nancy. The

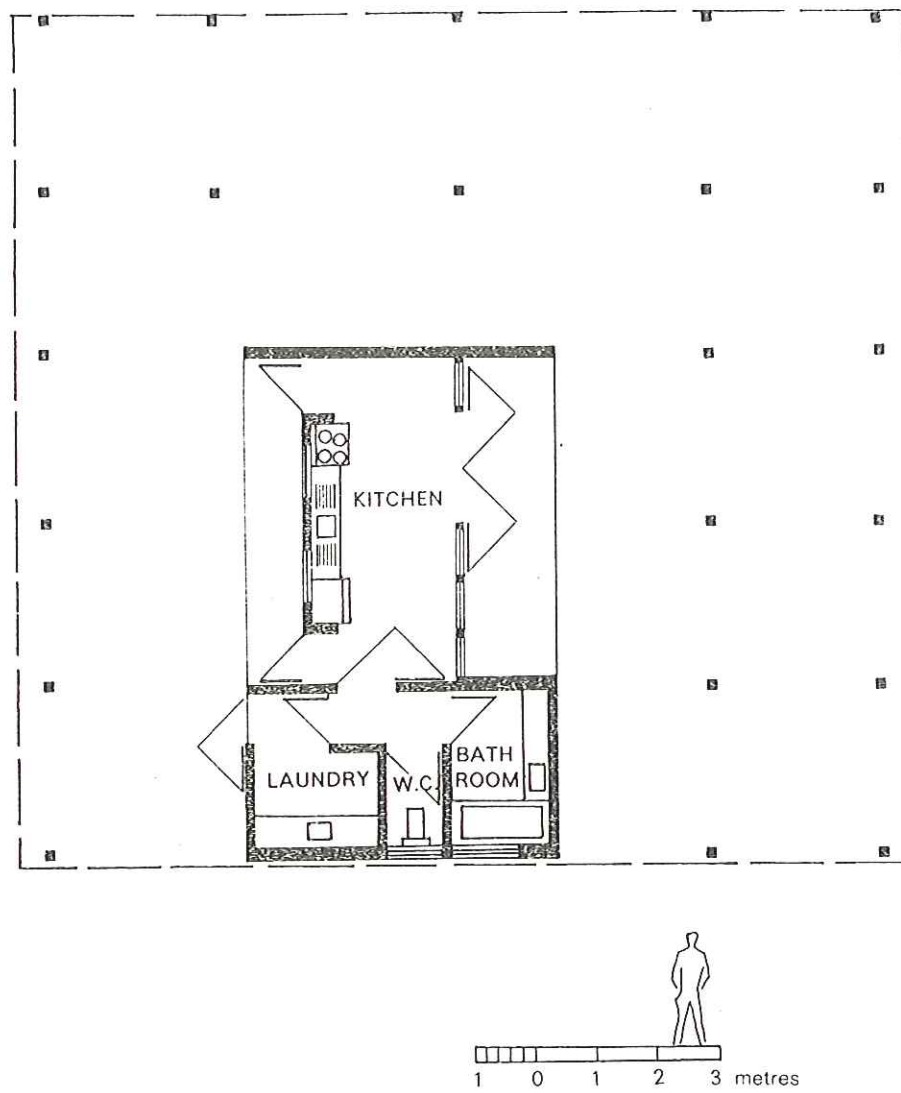


Fig.19 The Kardi house, Mt Nancy



visitor located his camp against the bathroom wall on the opposite side from the kitchen where most of the women's social activities occurred.

Each woman set up a 'camp' (which was a discrete area under the roof where her belongings were kept) where she slept and spent most of her time. One of the women located her camp in the narrow area beyond the kitchen which was in the natural pathway to the kitchen for the visitor. The other three women located their camps in the rooms to the side of and behind the kitchen.

In terms of the future development of town camps in Alice Springs and elsewhere, the move under the roof with the onset of rain was interesting. It suggested that such an area provided more suitable living space than a humpy. In those camps in which opinion is not yet set on the precise kind of housing required, the building of a few roofed areas with minimum amenities might provide vastly improved living conditions for a camp. It would also give the members time to become accustomed to the radically different spatial dimensions involved in substituting housing for humpies, to experiment with different configurations of rooms under a roof before deciding which is most suitable and to work out solutions to the management problems presented by keeping a house. For the town fathers, they would seem appropriate as an initial response where new town camps form. A result of this experience was that a simple multi-purpose building was designed for these purposes by the Panel, and this is briefly described in the next chapter.

How successful the Panel's designs are must be left for some other critic to evaluate, as, unfortunately, before the Panel could embark on an evaluation program, it was dismissed by the Commonwealth Government.

## Chapter 11

### A town campers' council

The comments of Dexter, when permanent head of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (quoted in Chapter 7), that the DAA could not solve the problems of Alice Springs - it was up to the people there - were well made. He continued by stating that the DAA could assist by providing material resources, and there was the rub. The DAA is yet another arm of government which dispenses welfare to the Aborigines with conditions. Since 1976, the conditions have become more stringent as Aboriginal organizations have been subjected to the demands of public service accountability, budgeting, forward planning, performance and other abstruse responsibilities. To receive the government largesse, Aborigines have to organize themselves into associations, as the first Liberal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Mr Viner, pointed out:

Aboriginal communities and organisations receiving grants from the Commonwealth are normally required to be incorporated so that they may be legally accountable and responsible for their actions.<sup>1</sup>

The law, then, was still to be involved and Aborigines had had a long experience of the methods of law enforcement officers (the Coniston Massacre, for example, was perpetrated by a law enforcement officer) and the kind of justice they could expect to receive from the Australian court system. Viner's emphasis was one that promised the Aborigines continued dependency on whites as they had to account for their actions (and the entrepreneurial risks they took - risks which were absolutely foreign to a bureaucracy) in order to resubmit their corporate begging bowl for funds for another year.

<sup>1</sup>Introducing the Aboriginal Councils and Associations Bill (1976) in the House of Representatives; see *Hansard* 1976 (12):2946.



The idea of Aboriginal organizations forging a future for themselves is important to an understanding of the way in which Aboriginal affairs are administered. It owes much initially to Charles Rowley and the influence some of his ideas had on the Council for Aboriginal Affairs. The idea of an incorporated council representing the interests of Aborigines in one particular area was first put forward officially by the Council for Aboriginal Affairs in response to the Department of the Interior's Cabinet Submission No. 370 in which the latter department sought to expand its establishment to provide additional services on Aboriginal settlements. Challenging the approach whereby Aborigines were the passive institutionalized recipients of services, the Council wrote:<sup>2</sup>

It is our provisional view that both missions and settlements should be developed as incorporated communities under the control of the residents (most but not all of whom would be Aborigines) being assisted by professionally trained managers, community development workers etc. The function of the incorporated community would be to develop community, group and individual enterprises which will earn income from external sources and from the replacement of goods previously 'imported'. The communities could also be developed as a source of labour for economic activities in the surrounding area and as the provider of services to other communities.

The purpose of these organizations was to transfer control of their economic futures to Aborigines and free them from their dependency on the arms of government. The idea was good, but the Council neglected to investigate the process necessary whereby Aborigines would shake off their bureaucratic chains and emerge as independent arbiters of their future. Providing instant organizations simply was not a sufficient condition for such a change as the Charles River community (described in Chapter 6) illustrated when it collapsed partly because of the strains elicited by the establishment by the DAA of a management committee and the unequal responsibilities which were thrust on one member of the community.

<sup>2</sup>H.C.Coombs to Minister, 6 December 1971:Northern Territory resource allocation on Aboriginal settlements.

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How the Tangatjira Council came to represent town camp Aborigines in Alice Springs is a useful example of the way in which Aborigines will set up and support an organization to pursue common interests and provide a necessary service, but only when they are motivated to do so. Motivation is not likely to occur until there is also a perception that some tangible advantages will flow within the short term from the operations of such an organization. Therefore, before there are grounds for setting up such an organization, there must exist a common set of desirable and attainable goals and a conviction among the Aborigines concerned that the environment is conducive to the achieving of the goals. The development of the Alice Springs town camps provided just such an environment.

The Tangatjira Council, at least in its original form, was not established by Aborigines. It grew out of the meetings of townspeople discussed in Chapter 6, which considered the plight of the 'itinerant' Aborigines and the problems of the town camps. With the completion of the report of the sub-committee of the Town Management Board and the decision by the NTA to develop two camp sites, political interest in these meetings subsided and they lapsed.

Because the DAA office was unable to take decisive initiatives to relieve any of the serious problems confronting unhoused Aborigines in Alice Springs, the situation of the town campers once again received adverse publicity in the town. In an attempt to forestall this criticism, in 1974 the DAA regional adviser called a meeting attended by 'people working with the different groups' to discuss the problems of the town campers.<sup>3</sup> The DAA regional adviser informed the meeting that the DAA had 'very considerable finance' to assist town campers and groups should work out their needs and ask for the finance.

Surprisingly, no representative of any town camp was invited to attend this meeting. The meeting considered the need to 'spend a lot of time interpreting developments and possibilities to them [town campers], as well as bringing people along from these groups'. These concerns were strangely out of spirit with the Labor government's policy of Aboriginal self-determination and were reminiscent of the historical paternalistic attitudes of whites. They also paid scant

<sup>3</sup>Minutes - Meeting on Aboriginal camping areas around Alice Springs, 5 February 1974.



regard to the possibility that the town campers themselves might have ideas about development quite different from the 'possibilities' which members of the group might draw to their attention. Rather surprisingly, also, in the absence of any town camp representation, the group decided to incorporate by 8 votes to 6.

By the following meeting, one town camper, Lindsay Turner, the manager of the Charles River camp, had been co-opted to a committee of nine.<sup>4</sup> At this meeting it was suggested that the committee form itself into an incorporated housing association and call itself Tangatjira, meaning 'working together to help each other'. The association would perform the function of acting as the financial administration of a number of autonomous town camp housing associations.

At the next meeting on 8 April 1974, the broad objects of the association were agreed:<sup>5</sup>

1. to do all that is necessary to obtain housing and other facilities for Aboriginal people in and around Alice Springs;
2. to do all that is necessary to investigate and meet social needs for Aboriginal people in and around Alice Springs.

Despite these commendable objectives, Tangatjira did very little to advance the development of town camps. It met in a desultory way during the remainder of 1974, discussing a number of self-identified problems, but never took any action over the issues discussed. It had two besetting weaknesses. It was reliant on honorary members to do the work, most of whom were already engaged in time-consuming activities in other fields in Alice Springs. Consequently, little concerted action was ever possible when the requirement was for painstaking and detailed planning as evidenced by the work involved in acquiring the Ntapa lease.

The second weakness was that the organization never appeared relevant to the town campers. Its members talked a lot but did little. Without positive achievements or an ability to indicate that initiatives were likely to yield positive results in the near future, Tangatjira never received more than token support from town campers. As Lindsay

<sup>4</sup>Minutes - General meeting on Aboriginal housing, 21 Feb. 1974.

<sup>5</sup>Minutes - Meeting of Tangatjira Council, 8 April 1974.

Turner said:<sup>6</sup>

I'm Anmatjarra and my country is up at Ti Tree. I'm in charge of that Charles River camp. The Arandas over that way aren't jealous. They said that's alright. I keep asking them to come to Tangatjira meetings, but they aren't interested.

By the end of 1974, Tangatjira had apparently faded into oblivion.

When the Panel started its work in Alice Springs at the end of 1975, morale in the town camps was low. There was a lot of drunkenness, many fights, much illness and a general apathy. Two camps, Ntapa and Mt Nancy, had established housing associations and had made leasehold applications but neither had anything to show for these actions. For the Panel, these two communities were the natural ones to start to work with as they had made most progress. Neither, however, was particularly enthusiastic about the Panel working for them.

At that time, the Interim Land Commissioner was hearing town land claims, but with the change of government at the end of 1975 these hearings ceased (see Chapter 7). The DAA then became responsible for negotiating leases with the Administrator of the Northern Territory. The town campers needed an interface between themselves and the DAA and the latter needed assistance with the preparation of schematic development plans to support the leasehold applications. With these requirements, there was a need for architectural assistance and contact was established between Wigley and Mt Nancy and Ntapa.

The leaders of these two town camps came to play important parts in the formation of a town campers' organization. Geoff Shaw of Mt Nancy and Eli Rabuntja of Ntapa were political opposites with different allegiances among the town campers. Both, however, early recognized the need to include all the town campers in discussions affecting the future of town camps in Alice Springs, especially as development was unlikely to advance in parallel in each town camp. Wigley recognized the advantages of such a general interest and sought to encourage the involvement as he realized the dangers of becoming too closely identified with one or two town camps if he was going to assist every town camp. From about June

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.



1976, Wigley used to hold informal meetings of town campers in his house to discuss developments.

With an interest in land rights developing among the town campers and with the frustrations experienced by Ilparpa and Mt Nancy at the long delays over securing leasehold titles to their land, a meeting of town campers was called which to some extent reflected the measure of political frustration being experienced. At the meeting were representatives from thirteen town camps, the Central Australian Legal Aid, the Central Land Council and the Central Australian Aborigines Congress (CAAC). The meeting decided<sup>7</sup> that something 'like Tangatjira' was needed to spell out their priorities which were:

- a) to establish and push town land claims;
- b) to have a body that can talk with and push politicians;
- c) to ask for courses on processes to help them to meet their needs and to deal with the department.

This organization was activist in conception, and in its objects contrasted markedly with its forerunner. Subsequently, meetings continued to be held in the Panel's office and the town campers were kept informed of developments in the town camps and in the political field.

Attendance at these meetings was assisted by the Central Land Council making a vehicle available to pick up representatives and return them to their camps after the meeting. Interest in these meetings was also assisted by the Panel beginning to discuss developments with each permanent town camp and doing the necessary groundwork for leasehold applications.

By the middle of 1977, with the granting of leases to Ilparpa and Mt Nancy and the beginning of developments in these two camps (Ilparpa had moved to Ntapa), it was clear to all town campers that something was beginning to happen. In April 1977, the Panel issued a report on the proposed urban development of thirteen town camps at an estimated cost of \$8.65 million (Wigley 1977), a figure which was subsequently adopted by the government as a financial commitment to a 7-year program to provide serviced housing to the Alice Springs town camp population. In August 1977, there appeared the first issue of a town campers' newsletter which came to be

<sup>7</sup>Minutes of meeting regarding fringe camps, 13 July 1976.

called the *Black Star*. There was a mood of expectancy in the town camps.

Despite all these developments, it could be argued that there was not a great need for a town campers' organization, because the CAAC (an Aboriginal organization whose Dr Cutter had prepared a health report on town camps, and which ran a health clinic) could provide the services which the town camps required. Indeed, it did already provide some of the services, being responsible for the garbage collection from the town camps.

Relationships between the town camp leadership and the CAAC were not good. The town campers believed that they had insufficient representation on the CAAC. They also were concerned by what appeared to be Congress policy of employing young men who treated the old leaders in the camps with scant respect. The town camp leaders did not like the leadership of CAAC, a dislike which merged into mistrust of one eminent Aboriginal. They were also very embarrassed (as Aborigines) by the public controversy which surrounded Neville Perkins's election to the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly and the allegations of use of CAAC funds in his campaign. Further, a well-meaning, hard-working and extremely able Aboriginal secretary simply could not relate to the tribal people in the camps. There were a number of occasions when she inadvertently affronted their dignity. For all these reasons, the town campers never considered the possibility of the CAAC taking their interests under its wing.

Another factor in the decision to set up an organization to represent town campers was a fear of the growing influence of the Department of Construction in its role as expert technical adviser to the DAA and a belief that it would supplant the Panel. Some of the more influential leaders were openly sceptical of the prospects of the Panel, believing that the better the job it did from an Aboriginal point of view, the more likely it would incur opposition in the corridors of power in Canberra. Not the least of their concerns was the knowledge that an influential Aboriginal in the head office of the DAA saw little merit in the Panel and could not be expected to sing its praises to the Minister. For these leaders, the fear was that without the Panel, the Department of Construction would take over responsibility for their developments with the result that once again they would become the pawns of the bureaucracy and would have no one to turn to for independent advice.



Wigley played an important role in the political gestation of the town campers' organization. If he and the Panel were to be a catalyst for development in the town camps, it was important that he did not act as a kind of broker for the distribution of government grants to each town camp. In mid-1976, there were already some envious glances made in the direction of Mt Nancy and suggestions that the Panel was only interested in that camp. It was therefore in the Panel's interests that some local representative group free it from being placed in a position where it might be regarded as influencing political decisions which could affect each town camp unequally.

In a wider context, the frustrations over the securing of the Ilparpa lease had convinced Wigley of the relative impotence of individual town camps to influence the political process in their favour. He was also concerned that divisions within the town camps could be used by unsympathetic parties to sow dissent and frustrate developments. He considered that an organization with a reasonably broad power base was required which could provide the political muscle, the unity and the will to resist any attacks on the development programs which might come from the many opponents of Aborigines in Alice Springs or from the often threatened white backlash.

By 1977, however, both Ilparpa and Mt Nancy had been granted their leases and Alice Springs was outwardly calm. There were no burning issues for the town campers. In the context of the establishment of a town campers' organization, the absence of issues was not auspicious. An organization set up to take political action when little political action was necessary and to make decisions about funding only once a year was likely to wither quickly. At that time, however, the management problems experienced by Mt Nancy had surfaced. While Wigley had been happy to assist Mt Nancy to work out ways to overcome these problems, he realized the demands would be multiplied as each town camp started its own building program. By 1977, the Panel, largely influenced by Wigley's work in Alice Springs, had come to realize the critical nature of local management to a successful development program and the difficulties of transmitting the necessary skills to persons and organizations wholly lacking in experience. By the end of 1977, however, there was some experience in the town camps, for Mt Nancy had resolved many of its management problems over the ablutions block and its infrastructure. There were, therefore, people who could pass this experience on.



In June 1977 Wigley invited two camp leaders, Wenton Rabuntja and Geoff Shaw, to attend a Panel meeting in Tennant Creek. At that meeting, the Panel was asked what help it could provide to assist the town campers to set up an appropriate organization to manage their affairs. The Panel suggested that it was up to the town campers to set up their own organization, but that the Panel would be only too happy to collaborate with it once it had been established.

On 5 October 1977 there was a meeting of twenty-five town campers to discuss the future course of development programs in Alice Springs. Eli Rabuntja, Wenton Rabuntja and Geoff Shaw were elected interim spokesmen. The meeting also decided to form an overall committee with the express purpose of lobbying for the provision of funds for adequate backup facilities in the camps such as the provision of maintenance services, the employment of tradesmen such as carpenters and the collection of garbage. The committee was to meet once a month.

A few days later, a meeting was held with Huey about the establishment of a town campers' council. He expressed support for the idea. The committee was then advised to see whether or not it could revivify the moribund Tangatjira Council so that it would not have to go to the expense of establishing a separate incorporated body. The committee of the original Tangatjira proved most accommodating and by early 1978 a renewed Tangatjira was operational.

By November 1977 regular weekly meetings of the committee were held. An adult educator, Bob Durnan, was employed to work as an unpaid facilitator (Tangatjira did not receive any funding until May 1978). There was a mood of determination in the organization and a desire to demonstrate to the rest of Alice Springs that the town campers could manage their own affairs and contribute to the township. A symbolic statement to its desired audience seemed the most appropriate way to do this.

By 1978 the Panel was concerned at the direction that the development of the town camps might take. It was one thing to provide housing for all the residents. It was quite another to ensure that they were able to maintain their traditional links with their tribal kin from distant settlements and cattle stations. If visitors were not considered in the development plans, two particular consequences could follow. Visitors might insist on staying in the houses, and,



with possible different lifestyles and experiences, impose intolerable strains on both the residents and the very fabric of the houses. Alternatively, the visitors might feel alienated from the town camps, being uncomfortable in the new, carefully maintained environment, and forsake the campers for the more familiar conditions of the extempore camp. In this way, they would begin a new cycle of the illegal town camp 'problem', the eradication of which was one of the principal objectives of the development program (that is for the government). For the town campers, the pressures would be great. They would see themselves becoming isolated from their kin and their roots. They would understand that part of the disorientation of their kin was elicited by the built environment, one in which well maintained houses predominated in stark contrast to the humpies of their kinsmen living in settlements and cattle stations. The Panel was concerned that one response of some town campers might be to change the language of their built environment to one of familiarity to the visitors. That could simply be done by vandalizing the buildings in the town camps. Consequently, it was considered that a building should be designed which could be used by visitors and which would also serve to bridge the discrepancy between their familiar environment and that of the developed town camp.

Wigley had also taken due note of the way in which the third prototype house had been used at Mt Nancy as a women's camp. He was concerned that a reasonably conventional house would prove quite inadequate to the shifting demands of single women's and single men's camps. Likewise, he had noted how the ablution block had been used as a community centre at Mt Nancy while the camp was awaiting its housing. Ablution blocks were rather inadequate (and somewhat embarrassing) community centres. There seemed a strong case, for those camps which would have to wait some time for their building programs to begin, for some kind of community/visitors' centre to be built.

Two other factors helped towards a decision to design a multi-purpose building as a training project for the town campers. One of the three spokesmen, Eli Rabuntja, had persistently requested a multi-functional shed for Ilparpa which could be used as a garage, a workshop, a meeting place and a place in which to put up visitors. In February 1978, Tangatjira had made a census of each town camp to establish what skills were possessed by the residents which could be put to use in the development programs. There were few. A



number had experience of ringing and could be put to work fencing the camps. A few had had experience of laying concrete slabs.

Wally Dobkins (a second Panel architect who had by then joined Wigley in Alice Springs) suggested to Tangatjira that he could design a simple building which could be erected by an unskilled workforce and could serve as a training project to become a focus for Tangatjira's energies and a symbol of its accomplishments. Accordingly a simple portal frame building on a concrete slab was designed with a lockup room, sink, power point for refrigerator and laundry and one-metre high screen walls to break up the large area underneath the roof and provide shelter from cold winds and driving rain. In those cases where these buildings were to be located away from toilet blocks, male and female toilets and showers were also included.

In May 1978 the first slab of a community or multi-purpose building was laid by a Tangatjira workforce and 6 months later, in November, the seventh building was completed. The project gave much needed work to the town campers. Above all, however, it gave both Tangatjira and its workforce confidence in their ability to achieve things of substance for themselves. The community buildings are now used as camp schools, for meetings, as visitors' shelters, as accommodation for families waiting for housing, as workshops and security areas and as places in which public telephones can be located with reasonable safety.

In 1978 Tangatjira was also providing other services to the town camps. In March 1978 at a meeting between Tangatjira, the Panel and Huey, the latter accepted the suggestion that the performance of management tasks was a critical aspect in any social development program. He agreed that Tangatjira should play more than a mere co-ordinating role in the physical development of the camps if it was to achieve any lasting impact on the camps. Huey agreed that Tangatjira should provide garbage collection services to the camps and as its skills developed, it should extend its activities into other areas. On 12 April 1978, Tangatjira was granted a budget by the DAA to provide garbage collection services to the camps. Since then, Tangatjira has expanded its activities and now has a fencing/welding gang, a hygiene gang which maintains the plumbing in the camps and is also responsible for landscaping, carpenters who assemble simple beds and a set of specialists who discuss the future developments in camps with the relevant town campers.



Tangatjira also wants to set up its own homemaker's service, believing that it has the kind of knowledge of the camps and of individual families within the camps which would be of inestimable value to the homemakers and in the design of an appropriate homemaker's program. Homemaker services, however, are the responsibility of the Northern Territory Department of Community Welfare which is unwilling to permit private organizations to share these responsibilities. In 1979 there were serious doubts in Alice Springs about the support the homemakers were receiving from the Department and concern that their effectiveness was being eroded (Thornton 1979), especially as, allegedly, only one car was available to the four officers.<sup>8</sup> It seems that there is a danger that Tangatjira and the town camps are being deprived of an essential service to any social development program more by departmental territorial defence than by any rational assessment of the situation and the content of the requirements.

By mid-1979 a number of independent observers were commenting on Tangatjira's success. Drakakis-Smith (1980a: 447), for example, noted that its success in improving the situation in the town camps had earned it the respect of the white community. Thornton, a DAA officer, wrote:

The Tangatjira Council, since its setting up as a funded body two years ago, has been highly effective in the local community. Its effectiveness comes from its strong community base and its council method of operating, through which it has immediate access to knowledge of the community's needs, and is able to meet these needs in an appropriate way because of its understanding of the family groupings, tribal law and ways of working. In addition it has made a very important contribution to providing employment and training for local Aboriginal people, building up a pool of reliable workers as described above. This aspect of Tangatjira's work has been extremely cost effective, generating a lot of employment for a relatively small investment (Thornton 1979).

Tangatjira is a rare example of an Aboriginal directed and managed organization successful in a commercial field (i.e. the tertiary sector), and the grounds for Tangatjira's

<sup>8</sup>Minutes, Tangatjira meeting, 18 May 1979.



success lie partly in the reasons why its forerunner failed. The original council was set up to perform much the same tasks as its successor, but never received more than token support from town camp groups. For one thing the council was white inspired and white dominated which, given the history of unequal relationships between white and black in Alice Springs, meant that town campers assumed that they would have an inferior position in the organization and no influence. What little development that had occurred in the town camps had always been done by outside agencies and, in most cases, by various arms of the Commonwealth government. In the recent developments at Little Sisters and Charles River, Aborigines had been given little opportunity to influence the course that the developments took. In 1974 little else appeared to have changed to the town campers. Admittedly, there had been a change of government but, despite its different name, the same old faces were still in Aboriginal Affairs. Tangatjira appeared yet another committee just like the ones which had preceded it which would voice pious concern and do the kinds of things the town fathers wanted rather than the things which the Aborigines desperately required. It is therefore not surprising that the town campers, still, in their thinking, a number of impotent groups dependent on government, were not motivated to take action while they appeared to remain totally dependent on government agencies for most of the decisions which affected their daily lives.

The factor which changed these attitudes was land rights. The opportunity to acquire leaseholds to the land on which they camped gave the town campers a common purpose. While it might be argued that the leasehold grants were made by the bureaucracy and, therefore, there was no change in the dependency relationship, they were only made after considerable effort had been expended in pursuit of them by the town camps and, given the apparent obstruction by DONT, appeared to be made in spite of the bureaucracy. In 1974, when Tangatjira was meeting, leasehold applications had been made by Ilparpa and Mt Nancy, but these applications had been done for them and neither group was particularly active in their pursuit. The passive attitudes of Aborigines to these applications changed in 1976 with the groundswell of a land rights ideology hitting them and all other Centralian Aborigines, and this was centred in Alice Springs where the Central Land Council was located. For the town campers, they changed largely because of the campers' involvement in the persistent efforts by the Panel and the DAA to secure leasehold grants in the face of the obstruction of DONT. This process, ending



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in the granting of the Ilparpa and Mt Nancy leases, had the effect of politicizing the town camps. Security of tenure had always been central to them. With the securing of two leases, other camps realized that it was in their power to take action to secure leases for themselves. In this endeavour, they were led to seek the services of the Panel to prepare the necessary development plans. With the relationship established, the Panel came to be a focal point at which town campers could meet among themselves. Out of these meetings came a realization of the advantages of taking concerted political action. DONT's obstruction, in fact, had the effect of focusing the town campers' attention on a government instrumentality which they perceived to be hindering the attainment of important goals. From the process of politicization and subsequent success of some of the leasehold applications, the town campers came to realize that they were no longer impotent and that, through political action, they could obtain other desirable goals. So long as leasehold applications were delayed or refused, as they were, there remained a cause which kept the political fires well stoked.

The recognition of the advantages of concerted political action brought town campers together. In due course, they began to talk about other problems which confronted them. From these meetings, there emerged a consensus of the appropriate action which needed to be taken to develop the town camps and improve their social and economic prospects within the town. The recognition of common aims, both political and developmental, enabled the Panel to tap the interest and prepare a comprehensive development plan for the town camps (Wigley 1977), a process which consolidated the appreciation of common aims among the town campers. The acceptance by the DAA of the plan as a framework for funding the development further reinforced the town campers' belief in their ability to take effective political action in pursuit of their own ends.

A developmental, management organization is an animal of a different kind from one designed to take political action to achieve limited objectives. The town campers also needed such an organization. While it was necessary to maintain a political stance so long as some leaseholds were still outstanding and additional funds were required from the government, a change in focus, in tone and also in skills was also needed if the town campers were to turn themselves into an effective organization responsible for managing their development programs and providing continuing services



necessary to their success. The necessary adjustment was effected with the acquisition of Bob Durnan to the staff of the town campers' organization. He immediately set about investigating and planning the delivery of services which the town campers identified as being required.

The period between November 1977 and April 1978, when Tangatjira received its first funds, was a difficult one. For Tangatjira, it was imperative to maintain its momentum and benefit from the enthusiasm of the town campers before their energies became dissipated by delay and inaction. During this period, Tangatjira received assistance from the Panel and the Central Land Council with the use of their offices, telephones and vehicles. At that time, with ideas about what Tangatjira might do flowing freely, the Panel's concern was that Tangatjira might promise to take on too many responsibilities and be overwhelmed by them. The Panel preached the value of a certain amount of caution during this period, urging Tangatjira to take on a few things at first and do them well.

An important impetus to Tangatjira's burgeoning self-confidence was the successful completion of the seven multi-purpose community buildings. One feature of this project was the importance to Tangatjira of having a flexible organization like the Panel working for it. The Panel by then understood the social organization and the living patterns of the town camps and with this knowledge was able to proceed quickly to design an appropriate building based on the skills possessed by the probable workforce. Timing was critical to the success of this project. Had the design of an appropriate building not been forthcoming, the enthusiasm of the town campers might have waned and an opportunity been lost. In such a situation, there was a great danger that the enthusiasm might never have been reignited. A second important aspect of the project was that the building was not just any old building thrown up to give Tangatjira something to do. It had an important function in the overall pattern of town camp development.

No organization is likely to be successful without good leadership. Tangatjira was particularly fortunate in this respect, having four talented and articulate leaders. Henry Ross, Wenton Rabuntja and Eli Rabuntja usually acted as spokesmen for Tangatjira in meetings with government instrumentalities. None of them were young men, and therefore they were able to develop a close rapport with the whole



town camp leadership. The fourth, Geoff Shaw from Mt Nancy, became the first executive director of Tangatjira and brought to the job his experience of the development of a management expertise at Mt Nancy.

Tangatjira, then, as a town campers' organization, grew initially out of the politicization of town campers over leasehold acquisitions and the securing of a commitment by government to provide funds to develop the town camps. From this basis of common interests, Tangatjira was able to extend its energies into the camp services field, activities at which it has, from all accounts, been successful. Its next major challenge will be to sustain its drive and momentum while consolidating and maintaining its activities, and not extending its interests into new and exciting fields. In this adjustment, for the first time, Tangatjira will be deprived of the services of the Panel, which was closed down by the Liberal government in September 1978 on the grounds that it was better to spend the Panel's operational grant (of \$173,000) on building houses and to rely on the Department of Construction's services as expert adviser on all matters relating to Aboriginal housing (Heppell 1979). By this action, the Commonwealth government was returning Aboriginal organizations to a pre-1973 situation in which they were utterly dependent on the bureaucracy for advice and assistance about housing and its relationship to an overall development program (though this was slightly mitigated in Tangatjira's case since it was permitted to employ one of the Panel's architects).

As the Department of Construction has assumed much of the role of the Panel in Alice Springs, it would be useful to examine whether or not it does provide the kind of expertise and service which the government believes it has. Tangatjira, certainly, was not happy with the government's alternative to the Panel, stating that the Department of Construction:

would take ... years to attain the Housing Panel's skills in the area. They would start off with a backlog of mistrust and bureaucratic inertia to be overcome. They have none of the personal experience or anthropological training possessed by the Housing Panel staff. Nor do they have the proven loyalty, dedication and responsibility to the Aboriginal community which has been demonstrated



by the Panel and which has led to its downfall.<sup>9</sup>

The Department of Construction, in the public debate surrounding the Panel's dismissal, was served with ample warning of the kinds of weaknesses it was thought to possess and was given a good indication of the kind of qualities Tangatjira sought.

Certainly, the Department of Construction has a problem in attracting staff to Alice Springs with a dedication to the Aboriginal community. In the two-year period between August 1977 and August 1979, the Department employed six different architects with responsibilities for town camp development, one of whom was replaced and then succeeded his replacement. Not one of these people ever had time to develop any relationship with the town campers, nor with their leadership in Tangatjira, let alone to begin to understand the functions of the development programs. Certainly continuity in approach was not enhanced by such frequent turnover in staff.

The Department's first responsibility, as Tangatjira feared, did not appear to be to its Aboriginal clients (as the Panel certainly considered it was), but to the DAA. For example, when vandals damaged houses being constructed at Ootnarungatcha, the Department reported the incident directly to the DAA and did not bother to inform Tangatjira. When Tangatjira asked the Department to report incidents to the Council, the Department replied that if it did only that, Tangatjira would try to sweep the incident under the carpet. Similarly with construction programs, the Department refused to allow variations to designs once construction had begun and, if a program fell behind schedule, it would report the fact to the DAA. Tangatjira was made to feel that they had no flexibility any more and were performing all the time, as Geoff Shaw described it, 'under the harsh glare of the Department of Construction always reporting about you to DAA'.

When the reverse happened, and through 'bureaucratic inertia' the Department failed to adhere to its own schedules, Tangatjira had no recourse to other advice and the DAA appeared unable to influence the Department of Construction (if it was still prepared to try). The case of the Mt Nancy roadworks (a diary of events which is given in Appendix IV)

<sup>9</sup>Tangatjira Council to Ian Viner, Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, 12 September 1978.



serves to illustrate the kind of lack of interest that a government department can have in an Aboriginal development program. Had something like this, for example, happened to the multi-purpose building, Tangatjira might never have become the successful organization it is today. It is interesting that 15 months after having been commissioned to design an internal road network for Mt Nancy and let contracts for its construction, the Department of Construction wrote, not to Tangatjira, but to the DAA to advise that it was withdrawing as consultant to the project and suggesting that implementation be handed over to yet another government department, the Northern Territory Department of Transport and Works.

More disturbing, however, than occasional inefficiencies and lack of interest is a noticeable trend towards, at least in the Alice Springs office of the Department, an attitude of the Department knowing what is best for Aborigines, a trend which has its antecedents in attitudes commonly held by bureaucrats towards Aborigines and which is assisted by the Department's primary responsibility being to the DAA. An example of the Department assuming that its responsibilities for definition of developments in Alice Springs are absolute was its preparation of a town camp housing program for 1979-80 which it submitted to the DAA without consulting with Tangatjira and before Tangatjira had prepared one of its own.

The Department has its own view of the future development of town camps. It differs greatly from Tangatjira's perhaps because it was developed without any discussion either with Tangatjira or any town campers. The idea is contained in a report prepared in 1979 and submitted to the Alice Springs office of the DAA (Department of Housing and Construction 1979). It is worth considering in some detail.

The report seemed to be partly motivated by a fear that, if the town campers were to maintain the traditional values which the Department thought they had, they would either become a constant drain on the taxpayer or the camps would become urban ghettos:

Under present planning arrangements of multiple tenancy, it is not possible to properly identify and allocate proper responsibility for maintenance of houses and payment for costs of essential services. Present planning places the town camps forever at the doorsteps of DAA seeking welfare

funds for support of maintenance and servicing costs.... in the long term, the Town Camps unless they are continuously supported, are destined to become ghettos in their own right.

According to the Department:

So long as traditional aboriginal groups place inter and intra family relationships, communications, responsibilities etc. above European style pride in possessions, there will be little motivation towards construction and maintenance of houses.

The Department was under a considerable misapprehension about both the purpose of the town camps and the government's policies for Aborigines:

The final important point was the intention to use Town Camps as 'transition' establishments or 'training camps' i.e. to provide residents with the facilities to assist in the implementation of self management or assimilation programmes [self-management had always been presented, at least officially, as rather different in concept from assimilation].

A fundamental assumption of the report was that:

the transition in lifestyle from traditional aboriginal to conventional urban Australian will also bring about an increase in the levels of responsibility for the maintenance of accommodation, and an eventual demand for home ownership in a conventional Australian urban scene ... The time span associated with this transition process is obviously unknown. However, it is asserted that the time span for consideration of the problem is not generations or years, but immediate.

The Department's solution was muddled. Apparently, there should be an 'admixture of lifestyles in both the short and long term, incorporating traditional shelter type facilities and more conventional European stylised housing' and each camp would 'vary in its development form and complementary to the transition in lifestyle of residents'. Precisely how this transition was to be accomplished was not



examined. Certainly, the town camps seemed to be a step on the way to being accepted in the township (note the downgrading in status of the town campers), but the 'multi family houses' being erected in town camps in Alice Springs (it might be noted that all the houses except the women's camp designed by the Panel for Mt Nancy were for single households) restricted a family's development:

For an individual to progress beyond the stage of rental control and welfare support, he or she must leave the camp and seek accommodation via other avenues, e.g. Housing Commission, or DAA sponsored private home purchase arrangements.

The Department's solution, which seemed to bear little relationship to the text, was to provide suburban type blocks as illustrated in Fig.19. The figures (a) and (b) represent the town plan for Mt Nancy as it is and as it should be according to the Department. The houses constructed in the town camps should be designed for 'single family unit occupancy and not multiple family, as is the present situation'. It should perhaps be noted that the reason Mt Nancy had two entrances was because there were two rival family groups living there, and it was feared that one entrance might lead to disputes. Not noted by the Department was the fact that houses there have been fenced by the residents, but in a way amenable to their needs. The way this has been done leaves room for visitors and for residents who prefer to live in caravans and use the community ablution block.

While the report contained many weaknesses which are not worth labouring here, it did reveal a sloppy argument which should be of concern. Its principal weakness was that it did not advance any evidence whatsoever to support any of its conclusions. Nowhere in the report was it stated how and what information had been gathered to support the arguments. Assertion followed assertion (many of which were inaccurate) and part of the solution, single family residences, was precisely the kind of housing Tangatjira was generally building which, one can only assume, the DAA's expert adviser was completely unaware of. What is particularly disturbing is that DAA's funding of Aboriginal organizations in the housing field is undoubtedly influenced by the Department of Construction. The DAA also has staff turnover, and many of its officers in Alice Springs have as little understanding of the town camps as the officers in the Department of Construction. Funding often comes with conditions, and if

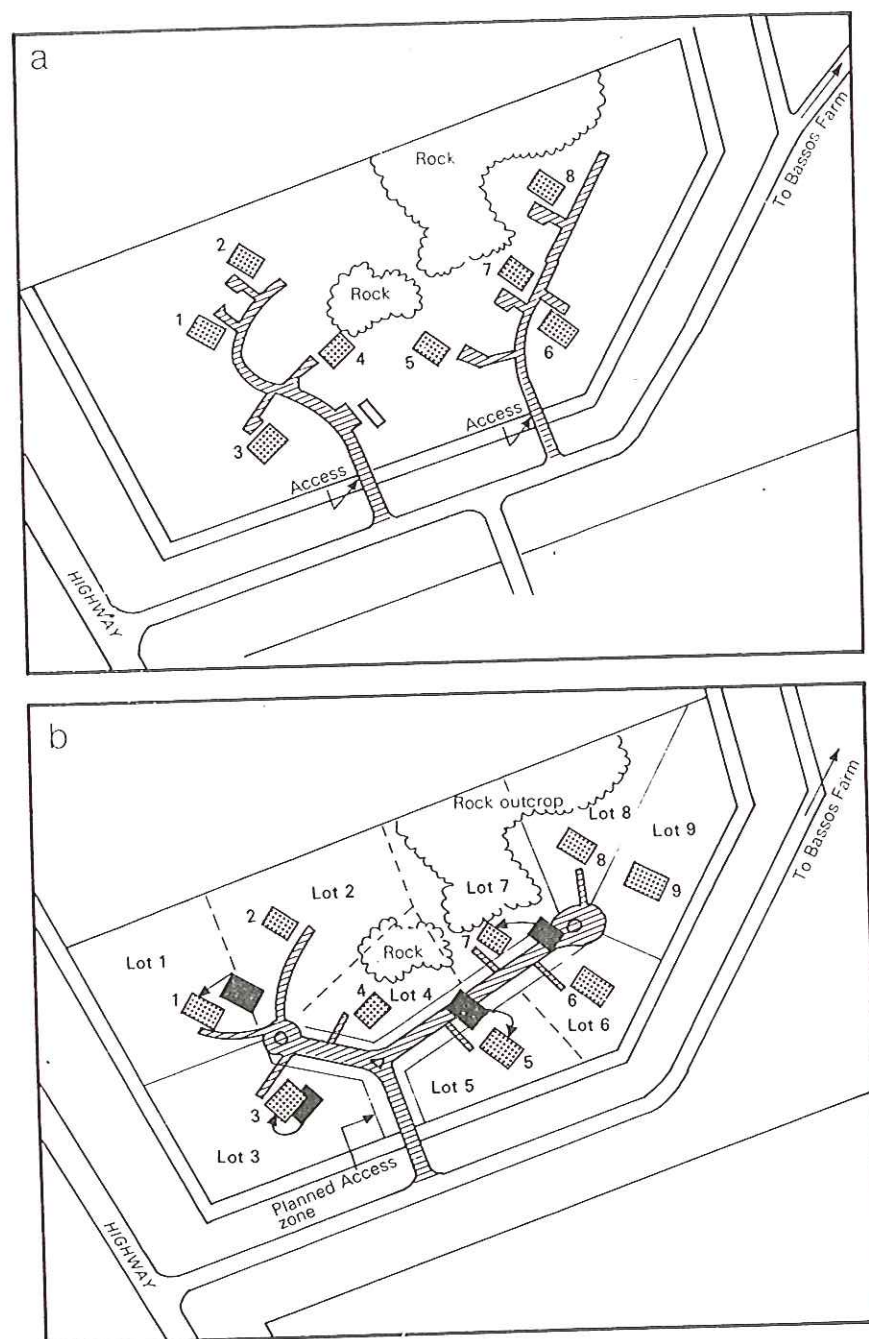


Fig.19 Mt Nancy town plan (a) as it is and (b) as it should be according to the Department of Construction.



some time in the future one of the conditions is to follow the recommendations of reports like the one being examined, it could have a serious impact on Tangatjira and town camp development in Alice Springs. The reverberations would reach far beyond the simple response of people to housing which they do not particularly want. Perhaps equally disturbing is the fact that reports such as these are made on an inter-departmental basis and usually do not come under public scrutiny. When they are acted upon, the grounds for policy shifts are never known.

What appears to have been a digression has been made to suggest that the wheel has turned full circle and Aborigines in Alice Springs are once again the hapless victims of whatever intents a bureaucracy might have for them. In Alice Springs, despite its success, the Panel has been removed, and the Tangatjira Council operates under the watchful and, apparently, far from sympathetic eye of the DAA and the Department of Construction. Tangatjira wants to provide homemaker services to the town camps but cannot because that is a responsibility of the Department of Community Welfare and it matters not that its service is found wanting. Tangatjira is on its own in a daunting field, with no independent and sympathetic organization to which to turn when it requires advice.

For the Liberal government, failure beckons in Alice Springs. One of the main considerations of the present government's practice in Aboriginal affairs is to try to keep Aborigines out of the news on the (largely correct) assumption that most Aboriginal publicity reflects badly on a government. Independent organizations like the Panel advising Aboriginal groups and not fearing to recommend political action to them when that is deemed necessary, not surprisingly make a government uneasy. There are times, however, when political action is necessary to achieve ends (as any politician will readily admit) and Tangatjira is an excellent example of an organization born out of such action. For the government, it is interesting to note that, with the successful completion of the action, there were no further grievances and Tangatjira was able to redirect the energies it had drawn on for the political action into other fields. Out of this process, the government has a rare successful Aboriginal organization which is recognized as such by white and black alike in Alice Springs. In the town, through its quiet competence, it provides excellent publicity about the government's programs in Aboriginal affairs. And, for the



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government, what is important is that such are Tangatjira's achievements that they provide no ammunition for the so-called 'white backlash' to feed upon.

The lesson of the rise of Tangatjira does not appear to have been learnt by the government, nor does it appear to have been applied in other areas. Rather than encourage small committed organizations like the Panel, the present government prefers to bring the delivery of services to Aborigines under the direct control of the Minister. The Aboriginal Land Fund Commission is another example of a separate organization which has recently been dismissed and its responsibilities transferred to an Aboriginal Development Commission whose board is appointed by and is directly responsible to the Minister, whose chairman is a senior public servant in the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and whose administrative arm is to be recruited from the public service. The Minister now relies for his advice on Aboriginal affairs on public servants who, given the way they must approach their duties, cannot develop the intimate knowledge of Aboriginal groups which is required before organizations like Tangatjira can be spawned and guided to success. For example, in the present political climate, it is inconceivable that a government department would have spawned an organization like Tangatjira to take political action over leasehold claims. It is doubtful that a government organization would have been successful in helping Tangatjira to make the transition from activist group to management and services group, because that transition could only be made with the help of people who understood the political reality of the town camps at that time in Alice Springs.

The problem for the government is that its departmental advisers often do not attain the kind of knowledge on which good advice must be based. The Department of Construction's report on town camps, for example, revealed an almost total ignorance about virtually every aspect of town camp life, not to mention about the government's often declared official policy for Aborigines. Its recommendations, if implemented, were most likely to give rise to the kinds of pressures which would lead to town camps reverting to urban 'ghettos' rather than rescuing them from becoming so. Such prevention (if that is a purpose of the government's development programs) will be achieved by good management, and that was one aspect which the Department's report quite failed to consider. Preventing ghettos is not likely to be achieved simply by building single family units on suburban type blocks and



making sure that the residents pay their rent.

Perhaps the Panel's great contribution to Alice Springs was being the catalyst for the emergence of a strong and creative town campers' organization and being able to provide it with the right kind of assistance when it was required. A token of that contribution has been the way Tangatjira was able to shrug off the demise of the Panel and move from strength to strength. Similarly, the DAA's greatest achievement was the recognition of Tangatjira's importance and the support it gave to the early leasehold claims and the establishment and funding of Tangatjira. The contribution of DAA, Panel and Tangatjira was joint, for it was mutually reinforcing based on a close and profitable working relationship. The success, however, was entirely Tangatjira's.

The future for Tangatjira, however, is uncertain, especially as now there are serious doubts that it will remain the sole arbiter of its future. So long as government departments can bring the organization to heel over questions of levels of responsibility, strict accountability and other bureaucratic requirements, there must remain a residue of doubt that Tangatjira will be able to make the kinds of management changes which will be required when the main development programs are completed in the town camps. The town campers face the certainty that there are many envious white eyes waiting for an opportunity to cry 'failure' and hasten a downward slide by some town camps back to positions of degradation and wretchedness. Tangatjira is blessed with strong and intelligent leadership. That leadership can only be effective if it receives the appropriate kinds of advice from its advisers. One of Tangatjira's principal problems for the future is that its advice is now limited to public service departments, some of which have already shown a profound ignorance of and disregard for town camp life.

## Appendix I

A petition to the Chief Minister of the Northern Territory, 1979

To: The Honourable The Chief Minister  
Mr Paul Anthony Edward Everingham Esq.

Dear Sir,

WHEREAS it is proposed by your Government through the medium of the Housing Commission and funded by the Commonwealth Government through the Department of Aboriginal Affairs to convert and erect certain special houses for the accommodation of tenants of a substandard nature who do not comply with the minimum standards of acceptability as tenants by the Housing Commission

AND WHEREAS the undersigned will suffer loss, injury, noise nuisance and injury to health as a result and will otherwise be dammified as set out hereunder

AND WHEREAS there are viable alternatives for the housing of the said sub-standard tenants which your Government has not explored

THEREFORE your petitioners will suffer loss if this plan proceeds because your proposed tenants are -

- (a) Unemployed and unacquainted with the work ethic.
- (b) Unused to suburban living and incapable of the performance of simple household duties which are the minimum requirements for suburban living e.g. the collection and removal of their own domestic garbage and litter.
- (c) Ignorant of the importance of hygiene.
- (d) Tribal or quasi-tribal so that the single family unit is not their customary family group but rather an extended family numbering scores of humans and canines.
- (e) Unacquainted with by-laws and reasonable standards of Australian urban behaviour.
- (f) Subject to addiction to alcohol.

YOUR PETITIONERS WILL BE INJURED AS FOLLOWS -

- (1) Householders who follow the Australian work ethic cannot maintain surveillance of their property during working hours.
- (2) Petitioners who are shift workers without whose assistance such essential services as power, ambulance, fire and Police would not operate will suffer acutely from noise and pollution emanating from your special houses.



- (3) Ordinary working families will suffer noise and disturbance during ordinary sleeping hours from the noise created by these unacceptably large domestic units.
- (4) Your petitioners anticipate suffering health problems arising from the accumulation of large deposits of unsanitary domestic rubbish.
- (5) Your petitioners will suffer stench problems and the putrefaction of the air they breath arising from the tenants inability to remove rubbish.
- (6) Your petitioners will suffer a little problem in the streets of Alice Springs and damage to the aesthetic beauty of the town.
- (7) Your petitioners foresee that you intend to construct numerous special houses as aforesaid and to undermine the quality of life, general health, happiness and quiet enjoyment of life thereby depriving your petitioners of the minimum expectations of any Australian following the working ethic and contributing taxes to her Majestys Government.
- (8) Your petitioners in the immediate neighbourhood will suffer financial loss in the lowering of the value of their homes in which they have invested their savings gleaned by years of careful effort in adherence to the aforesaid working ethic and notwithstanding the ravages of Her Majestys tax collection.
- (9) Your petitioners will suffer financial loss in the inability to sell their homes or let their homes at reasonable prices and rates.
- (10) Your petitioners in the Gap area are distressed by fears that the continued peaceful integrated existence of the races will be disrupted by your crash assimilation program and friction between the races will be thus fostered and fanned.
- (11) Your petitioners are concerned that your proposed tenants do not desire to cope with the responsibilities and stresses of suburban living and your tenants will thereby suffer unhappiness.

NOW YOUR PETITIONERS

pray that you cease forthwith the program on which you have embarked  
 you cease to threaten the quality of life of your humble petitioners  
 and that you arrange for the construction of a village to house your tenants  
 away from the township of Alice Springs so that your petitioners will not be  
 damnified as aforesaid.

Appendix II  
Developments in town camps

Town camp	Lease area ha	Date of lease	Houses proposed	Houses built	Houses proposed 1980-81	Maximum capacity of lease	Toilet blocks	Community buildings
Ilibilili Tjatja	8.72	30.1.79	15	6	1	21	1	1
Purarultna	0.92	25.7.79	4	2	1	5	-	-
Bazzo's Farm			-	-	-	-	-	-
Mt Nancy	4.25	16.7.76	14	8	-	12	1	-
Ntaka Ulpaya	?	12.8.77	32	14	8	30	4	4
Ootnarungatcha	6.9	28.12.78	15	7	8	19	3	1
Knudnara	2.76	22.12.77	9	5	3	11	1	1
Ilpea-Ilpea	(27.00)		14	-	10	75	-	-
Yarintja	(90.00)		28	-	8	25	-	-
Ntapa	14.41	8.11.76	15	6	1	25	2	1
Injlunga	?	11.6.73	14	5	3	19	2	-
Paranja	(3.00)		4	-	5	10	-	-
Ilparpa	(2.30)		-	-	5	7	-	-
Mbutjara	(1.50)		-	-	4	9	-	-

Source: Tangatjira Council, 24 December 1979.

Note: Lease areas in brackets are leases not yet granted.



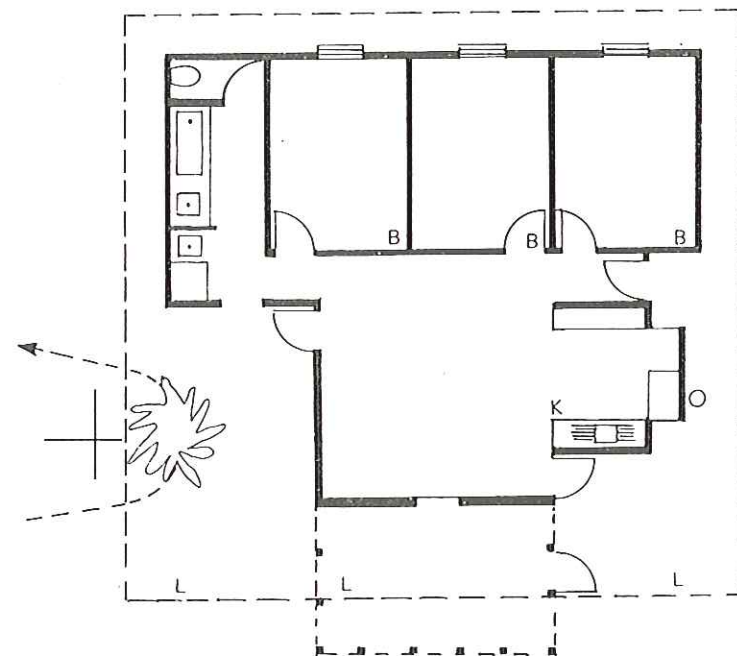
## Appendix III

Floor plans of houses designed by Mt Nancy households

1. Family unit: Married couple with two female infants. The head of the household had a wealth of experience of housing in different parts of the world, having served with the Australian forces overseas and in particular in Eastern Malaysia (Sarawak) and Vietnam. An exceptional relationship was developed by Wigley with this person and much of the development of the final designs were made with him.

Requirements:

- (i) Separation of ablutions area from kitchen;
- (ii) kitchenette leading on to enclosed living area;
- (iii) three bedrooms, the third for visitors;
- (iv) verandahs facing south, north and east;
- (v) a separate (i.e. not integrated with house) flyscreened area facing east.

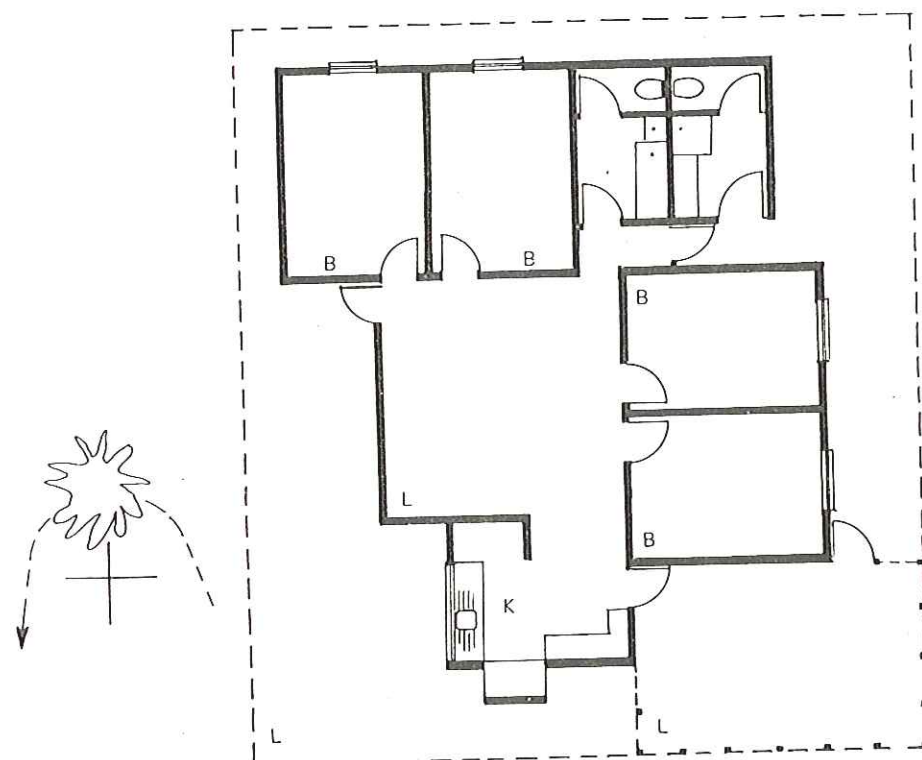
Floor plan:

2. Family unit: Two elderly adults, one single man and two male and two female school-age children.

Requirements:

- (i) four bedrooms so that children of different sexes could be separated;
- (ii) flywire enclosed living/sleeping area facing south for young men to sleep in;
- (iii) internal living area which could also be used to separate sexes at night (the inner area being regarded as a potential place for single women to sleep);
- (iv) verandahs facing east and west.

Floor plan:



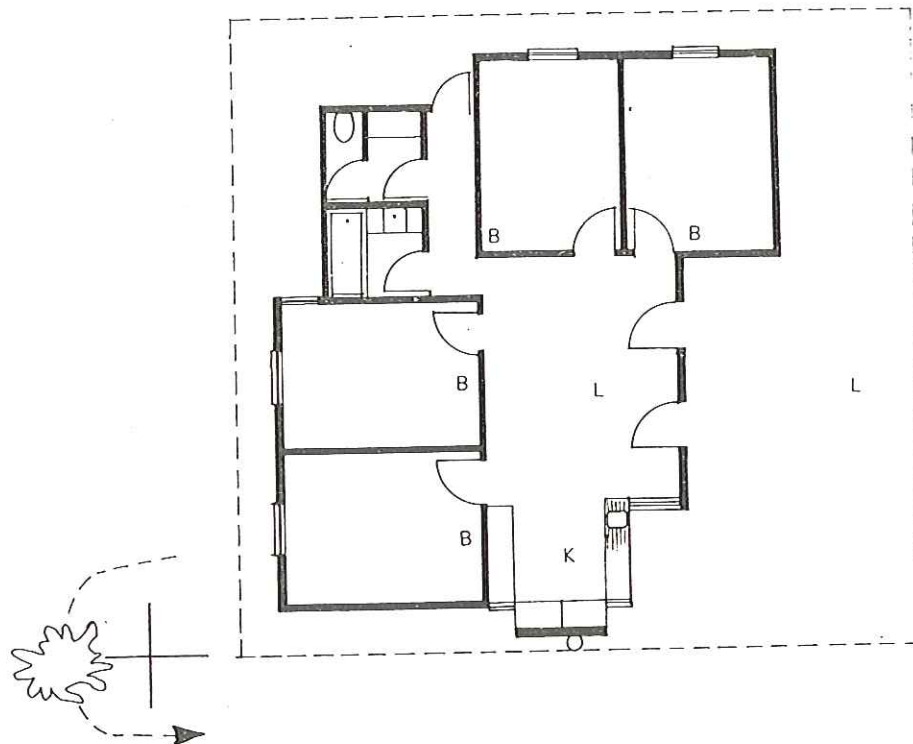


3. Family unit: Married couple with one male and one female adolescent child and the husband's single brother, staying with the family. This family was particularly concerned with its status in the camp and the man's reputation as a stockman. It had, for a short time, been tenants of the Northern Territory Housing Commission in Alice Springs.

Requirements:

- (i) Four bedrooms. The family was not certain about this requirement as it acknowledged that the two children, because of their insecurity, tended to sleep with the parents, and the younger brother was often away as a migrant labourer;
- (ii) large verandah facing south (towards the household in 2 above and towards other camps where brothers of the householder lived);
- (iii) large food storage area;
- (iv) smooth floor which could be mopped up;
- (v) bathroom with bath. A separate laundry was also requested;
- (vi) wood stove inside the house.

Floor plan:



## Appendix IV

Diary of Mt Nancy roadworks development

- 7 April 1978 Department of Construction commissioned to design internal roads with surface water control and landscaping considerations.
- 16 June 1978 Department of Construction provides preliminary estimates and specification with construction program. Advises that tenders will be let on 21 September 1978.
- 9 July 1978 Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Housing Panel instructs Department of Construction to proceed to tender on basis of submission dated 16 June 1978.
- 16 August 1978 Department advise a revised program. Tenders to be let on 22 December 1978.
- 20 February 1979 Department of Construction write recommending Kenna Nominees be accepted as lowest tenderer.
- 23 February 1979 Tangatjira Council confirm that contract to be awarded to Kenna Nominees.
- 28 March 1979, 9 April 1979 Tangatjira Council request Department of Construction to advise when contractors will be on site.
- 12 April 1979 Department of Construction advise withdrawal of Kenna Nominees and confirm that PMT will undertake contract.
- 18 April 1979 Tangatjira Council instruct Department of Construction to proceed with PMT.
- 19 April 1979 Department of Construction confirm PMT will start end of May with completion in 4 weeks.
- 5 June 1979 Tangatjira Council write to Department of Construction requesting advice on progress of roadworks.
- 8 June 1979 Department of Construction advise of problems letting contract.
- 11 June 1979 Department of Construction verbally advise that they doubt if PMT will be willing to undertake the work.
- 15 June 1979 Tangatjira Council write to Department of Construction asking for confirmation of position on the contract.
- 5 July 1978 Department of Construction write to Department of Aboriginal Affairs advising its withdrawal as consultant on the roadworks and suggest that implementation should be handed over to the Northern Territory Department of Transport and Works and contract to be retendered or undertaken by direct labour through the Department of Transport and Works.

Source: Tangatjira Council, 9 July 1979.



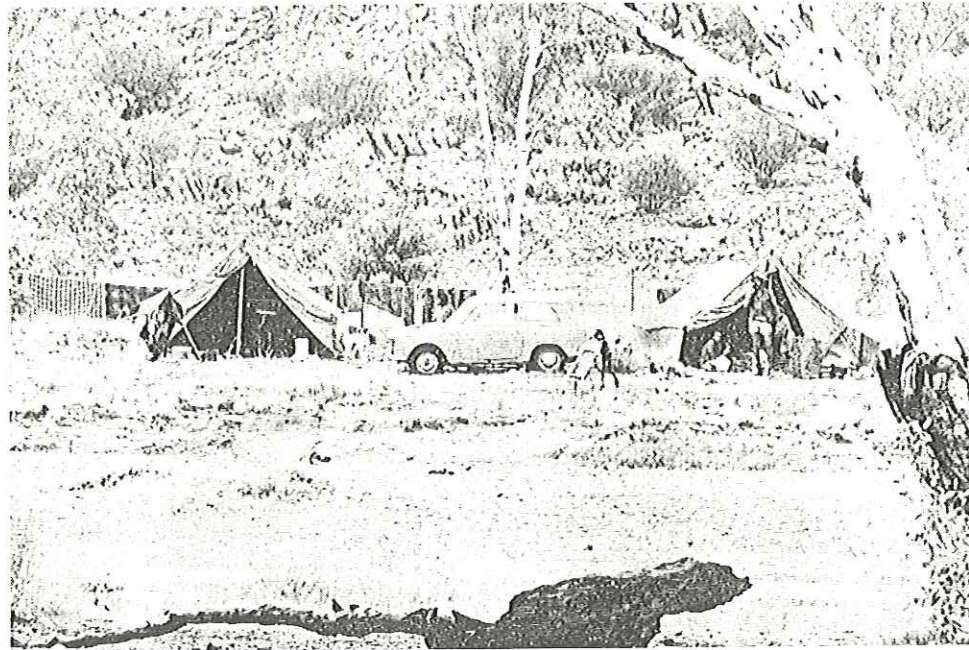


Plate 1 Typical camp in creek bed in 1976. Inhabitants are temporary visitors to Alice Springs.



Plate 2 Temporary camp to north of Alice Springs, 1976. Note size of dwelling and swept area during very wet period in Alice Springs.



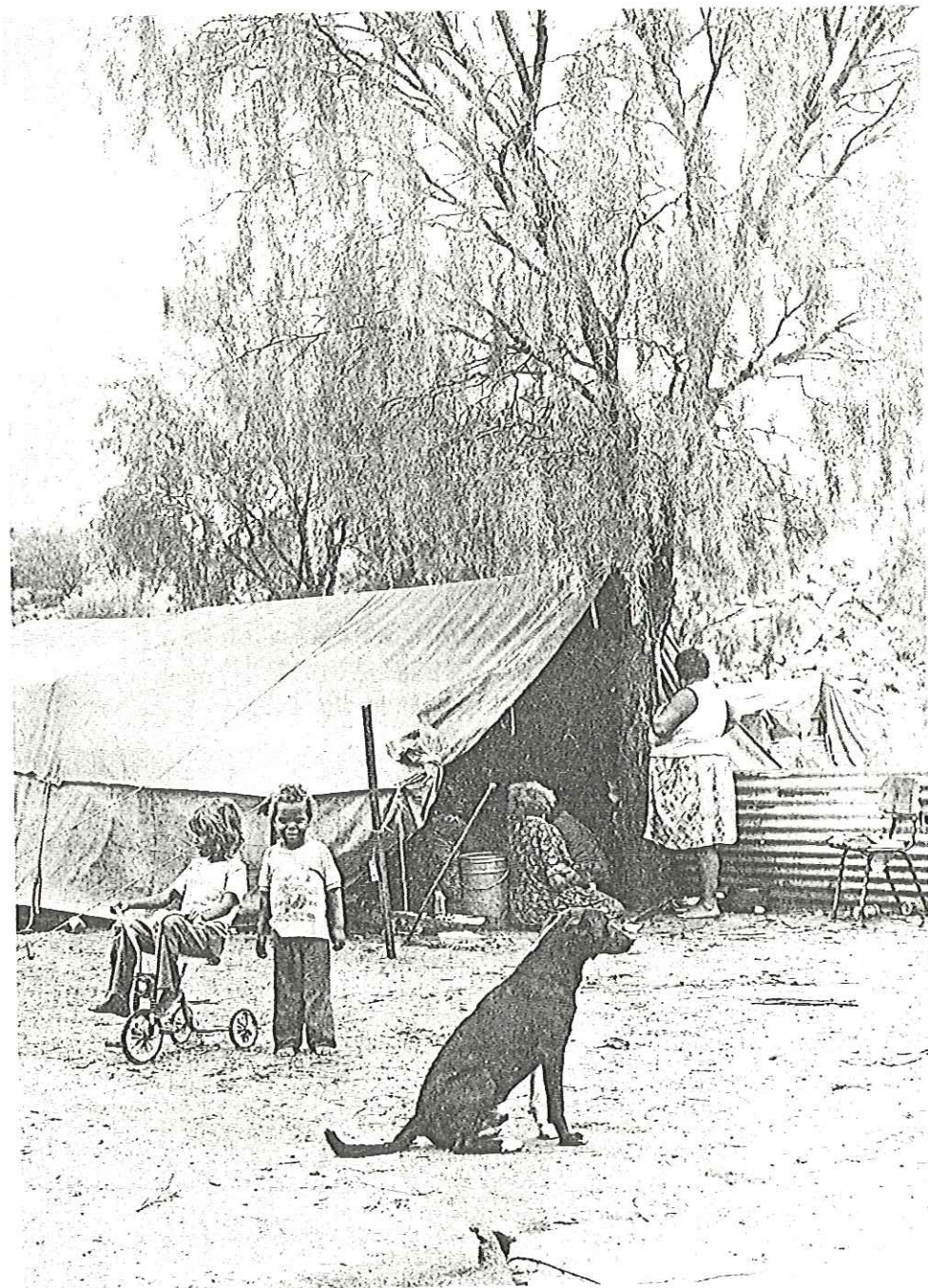


Plate 3 Typical camp with windbreak, 1976. The tents were provided from Federal Government grants.



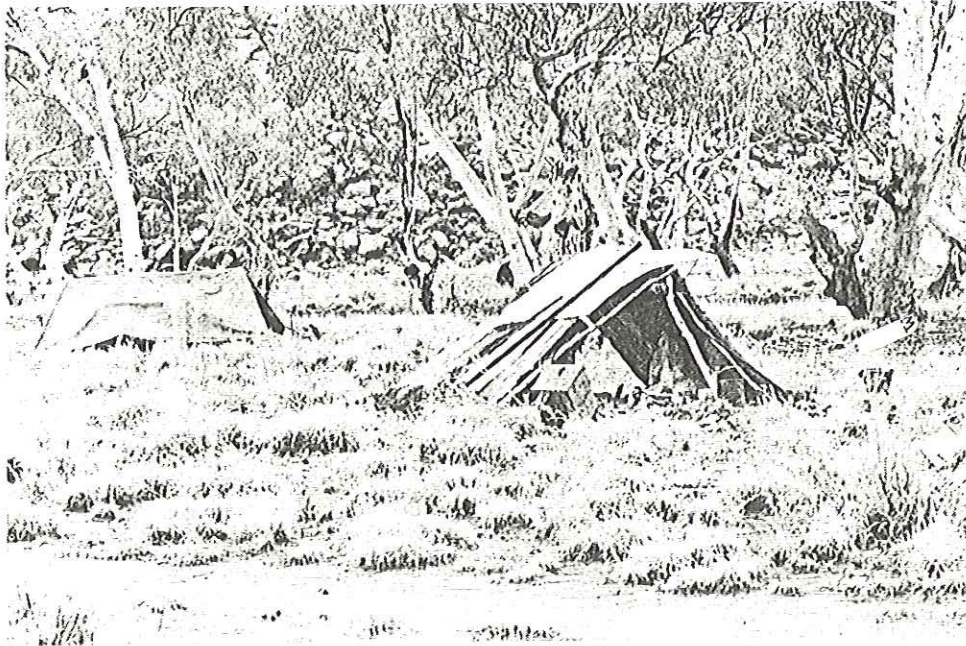


Plate 4 Camp of a permanent dweller in Alice Springs, 1976.  
The person had resided in such circumstances for many years.

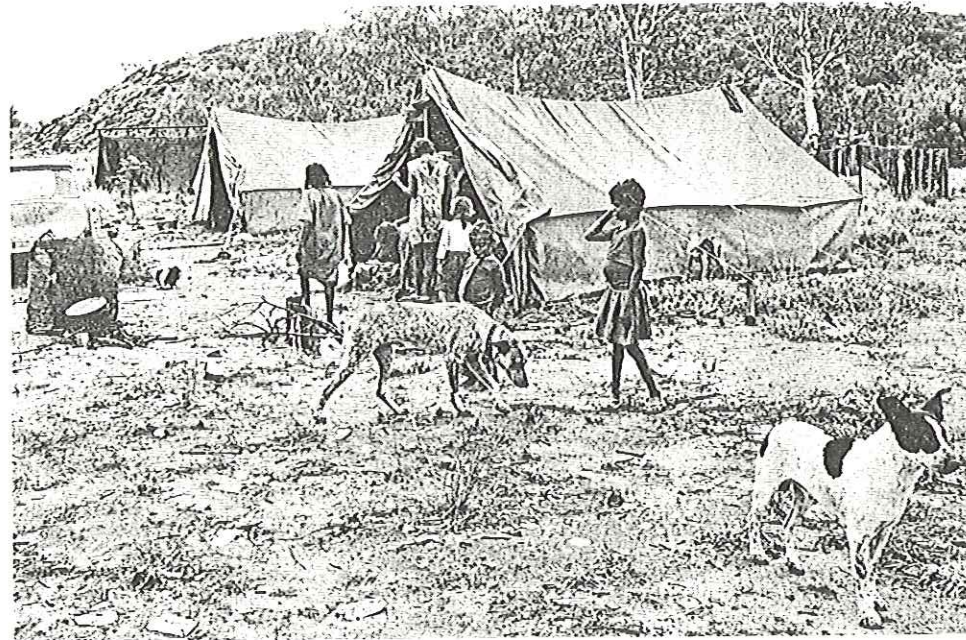


Plate 5 Same as Plate 1 showing army tents provided out of Federal Government grants.

tents were



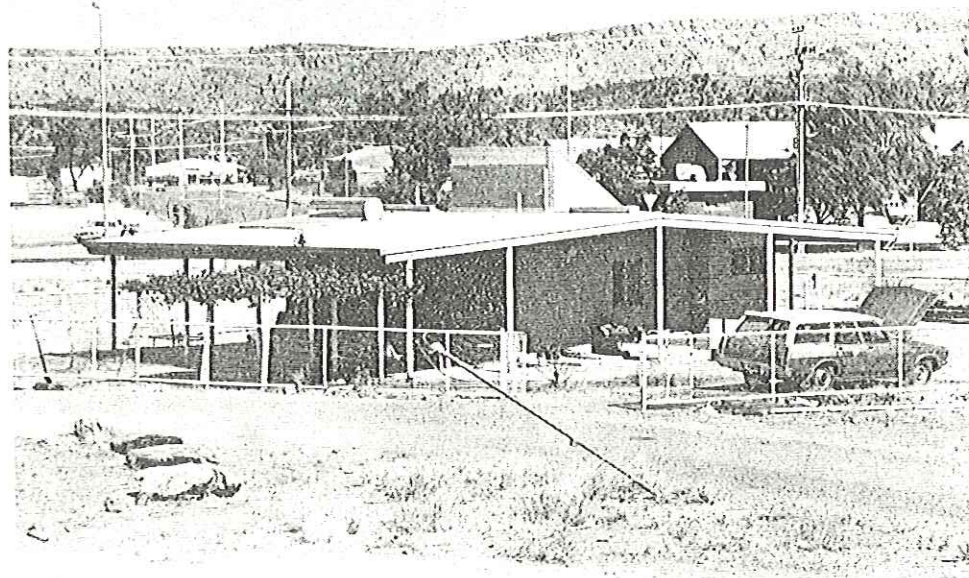


Plate 6 Looking down on house at Mt Nancy originally designed for an elderly man. Note the white painted fencing and supports to assist person with very poor eyesight.

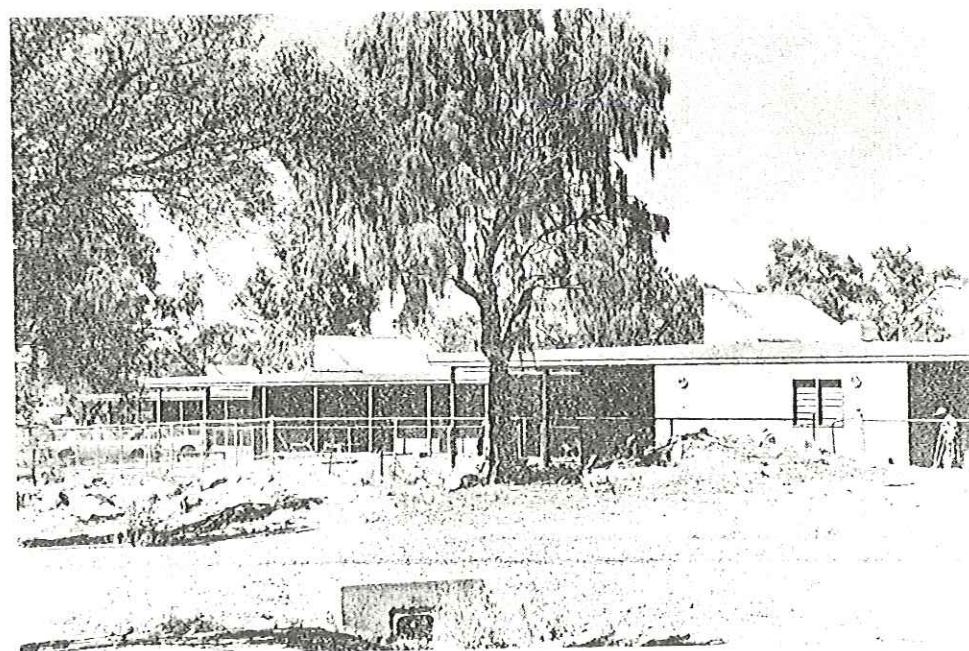


Plate 7 General view of houses erected, since the preparation of this book, at Ilibilili Tjatja, looking east.



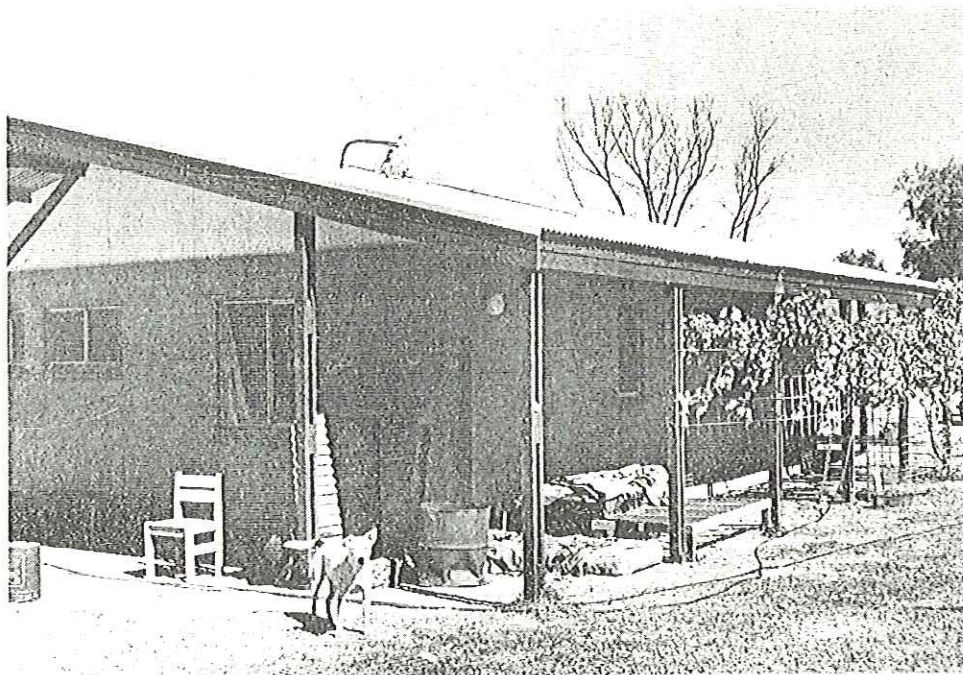


Plate 8 View (north face) of a 1-bedroom house at Nyewente camp showing development of planting and use of verandah.

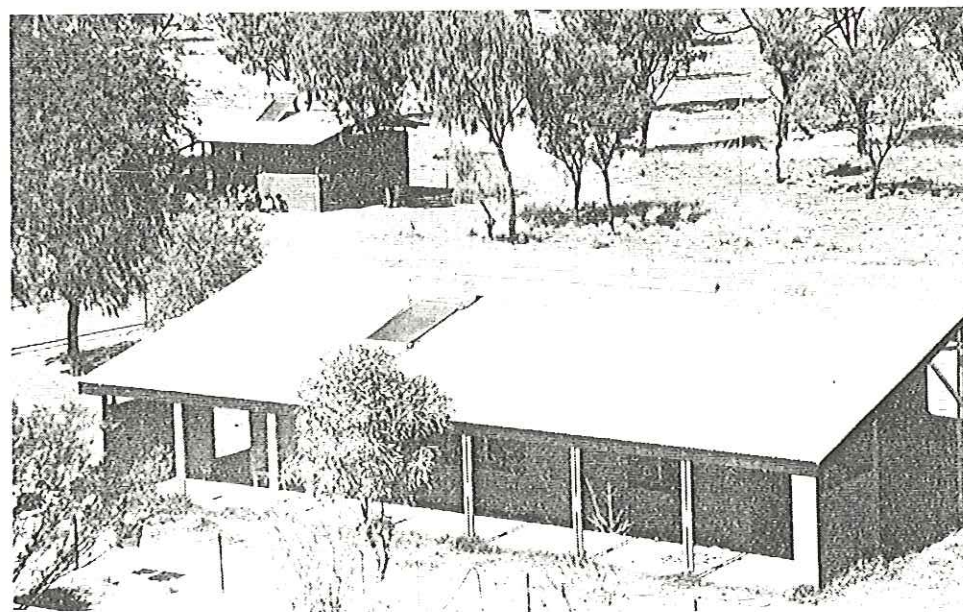


Plate 9 View of a 2-bedroom house at Nyewente. In the background is the shelter/toilet block later developed by the Tangatjira.

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