

GHOST HOUSES

At least once a year for the past two decades, Steven Herrick has returned to visit Brisbane's Coopers Plains, the suburb in which he grew up. Each time, to relive his fondest memory, he rides a bicycle from his old house on Keeling Street, which still has the same coat of paint his father applied in 1972, for 6km to Runcorn's Wakerley Park, which takes its name from his uncle Colin. Wakerley Park is home to Souths United, Herrick's beloved boyhood soccer club.

Along the route, the ramshackle corrugated iron igloos of Damour Barracks on Orange Grove Road have been replaced by a housing estate, Stable Swamp Creek is now a drain, and the Oasis and Acacia swimming pools on the corner of Turton St and Station Rd are now townhouses.

Between Banoon station and Coopers Plains station on the Beenleigh rail line, small concrete block houses – nicknamed the Dutch houses – were once cluttered in a suburban triangle bordered by Breton St, Boundary Rd and Troughton Rd. Gradually the houses have been knocked down. Some fell prey to the ravages of time and developed structural problems. Others were bulldozed to make way for Cornerstone Living, the new \$600 million development that will soon colonise the entire suburb. The few remaining Dutch houses cut forlorn figures, marooned among palm trees and vacant blocks of land, with fences, back yards and driveways that lead nowhere.

Brisbane-born Herrick, who now lives in the Blue Mountains, NSW, is an author of 23 books for children and young adults. *Water Bombs*, published in 1992, has a poem titled *The Witches of Coopers Plains*, evoking memories of scary old ladies who lived in Rookwood Avenue, adjacent to his home. *By the River*, published in 2004 and the winner of several awards, is about the destruction that

The death knell of renewal has rung for the distinctive Dutch dwellings of Coopers Plains in Brisbane's south.

STORY JOE GORMAN
PORTRAIT DAVID KELLY

a flood visited on "Cowpers Paddock". His plaque on the Albert Street Literary Trail in Brisbane city refers to trains, "funny houses on stilts", tropical fruit, and the "pure juice of childhood". Reviewer Andrew Riemer said Herrick's writing "describes an Australia that no longer exists, but one that some of us, even those who grew up in the outer suburbs of big cities, remember with affection".

Herrick is also my dad. "Remember those Dutch houses I used to tell you about when you were a kid?" he asked me recently. "They're nearly all gone. It's like I'm riding through a ghost suburb."

In the Coopers Plains Library, hidden between the self-published paperbacks and glossy coffee-table books in the local history section, is Alfons Vernooij's book *The Dutch Houses of Coopers Plains: A Postwar Housing Debacle at Brisbane*. As returning soldiers and steady immigration created a postwar housing shortage, the Queensland Housing Commission

contracted European firms to construct cheap, prefabricated homes in northside Zillmere and Chermside, and Inala and Coopers Plains in the south. Materials and many of the skilled workers, including Vernooij's father, were imported, and between 1951 and 1955, Concrete Developments Pty Ltd, a Dutch-Australian company, built more than 300 Dutch houses. They were not designed for the Australian climate, and many had to be fumigated for borers and were affected by rising damp.

Fred van Breemen, 77, came to Australia in 1954 on the migrant ship *Johan Van Oldenbarnevelt*. He worked as an auto mechanic, was a founding member of Hollandia Soccer Club and coached at Souths United. His father found employment at the now century-old cement works in Darra, 10km west of Coopers Plains, which provided much of the materials that built the Dutch houses. At 24, Fred met Marijke Bakker. They were married in 1966, and by 1972 had moved into Marijke's family home on the corner of Bland and Macgroarty Sts. "My old man is the one who built the rest of those houses, but her dad is the first one who lived in this house," Fred says. "We met, more or less, in this house. I sat at this table when I first came in, and I'm still sitting in the same spot."

Via a Housing Commission loan, Marijke's father was able to purchase the house, and it has remained in the family since. Their ownership is evident in the renovations to the kitchen, patio and bathroom, the new fence and garage, which houses a modern car with an "NL" (Netherlands) sticker on its rear window. After apartment buildings replaced the Dutch houses in their street, they put the house on the market, just to see the price it might fetch. "But we've got no intention of selling," says Fred. "Really, we don't want to leave. We got the roots in this place, you can say."

A few streets over from the van Breemens lives ►



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**FRED VAN BREEMEN (WITH
WIFE MARIJKE), COOPERS PLAINS
RESIDENTS SINCE 1972**



DRIVEWAY TO NOWHERE... A YET-TO-BE REDEVELOPED SITE OF A "DUTCH HOUSE"; (OPPOSITE PAGE) ARTIST'S IMPRESSION OF THE CORNERSTONE LIVING PROJECT.

Johanna. She won't give her age or surname, but says she arrived as a teenager in 1953, also on the *Johan Van Oldenbarnevelt*. In 1963, she married an Australian; in 1965, she gave birth to her son; and in 1972, her husband "pinged off". Since then, she has devoted herself to work, her son, her pets, and maintaining her Dutch house. Johanna has paid a small fortune in rent – 2016 will mark her 50th year as a tenant, and she's probably paid enough to own the house several times over. Johanna says she was prevented from buying it outright because "I'm only a woman". After she was hit by a car in 1978, she gathered enough money for a small deposit but says she was told she'd never own it, "because I could get pregnant".

Johanna now lives next to vacant blocks instead of neighbours, but in her modest back yard are a frangipani tree and a green Holden she bought

in 1968, its bumper decorated with a small, faded Dutch flag. The house and the Holden appear to mirror Johanna: honest, reliable, Dutch-Australian, resolutely working-class, ageing a little but as tough as nails. "I'm happy," she says. "I've got a nice old car, a good son, a beautiful dog, and a house that has cost me an arm and a leg. But still ..."

Although she has no desire to move, Johanna's home appears to be in line for demolition. Consolidated Properties managing director Lachlan Grantley, who is overseeing Cornerstone Living, says none of the remaining public housing in the area will be Dutch houses. "Ultimately, there will be 1300 private properties and 109 public housing properties," Grantley says. "No new public housing properties will be built."

Many of the existing residents have already been relocated. Grantley cites the example of

a woman who sold her old Dutch house to the developers and bought a Cornerstone Living apartment just a couple of streets away. She sold for more than the price of the new apartment, and her daughter and son-in-law plan to purchase their own unit nearby. Others who are hanging on to their Dutch houses are pondering whether to stay put or sell. The odds seem stacked against them – three-, four- and five-storey apartment blocks are sprouting up everywhere, and some are worried about the sheer scale of development, particularly about parked cars clogging the wide, quiet streets.

The new buzzwords in Coopers Plains are "rejuvenation" and "suburban renewal". A brochure promises "something for everyone", while a large billboard on Boundary Rd proudly advertises a "new suburb emerging". It will be the market that decides the fate of the few remaining privately owned Dutch houses. The ones owned by the state, with low fences, dry lawns and fading paint, will be knocked down. And with them will disappear a piece of Brisbane's social history.

For the past 20 or 30 years, Brisbane has craved the new house, the new supermarket, the new shopping centre," says Herrick. "Brisbane hovers between being a provincial town and a metropolitan city. Sometimes I think it wants to build itself out of provincialism."

This is a wholesale, deliberate transformation of a suburb, encompassing ideological, physical, aesthetic and demographic changes. Yet aside from a few murmurs among residents, most have accepted the changes. There has been bipartisan support for the project from the Bligh, Newman and Palaszczuk governments, and in three years of construction there have been no official complaints.

In 2012, when the tender was awarded to Consolidated Properties, a few objections to development were raised in a local newspaper article. A comment below the online version of the article is illustrative of a broader view of the area: "Have these people not looked around their suburb?" asked "Simone of Brisbane". "Coopers Plains can only be improved."

Although it has never been a glamorous area, Coopers Plains is in a prime location 20 minutes' drive from the city and close to Griffith University, hospitals, schools, shops and public transport. Cornerstone Living is spruiking a "brand new neighbourhood", with "extensive existing facilities and infrastructure right on your doorstep". Of course, to the developer's eyes, this concentration of public facilities, but not the public housing, is of value.

In 2013, the Newman government released its *Housing 2020 Strategy*. The old attitude, it read, "was a view that social housing was a home for life"; the new attitude was "greater emphasis on social

housing as a transitional period on the path to private rental or home ownership.” In part, this is ideological – an inherently aspirational view that being poor or working-class is only a “transitional” phase – but it’s also a response to a booming population. Over the past 20 years, Brisbane’s population has grown 52 per cent to 2.27 million, well above the national average rate. By 2027, it’s expected to reach 3 million. In the postwar period, the answer to a population boom was public housing. Now, the solution is to increase supply in the private market and break up concentrated enclaves of public housing tenants. Public housing in this section of Coopers Plains will drop to less than 10 per cent of the total, with promises from the government that the money gained from the development will be reinvested in new public housing elsewhere.

At the intersection of Boundary and Troughton Rds, a slick new cafe services those visiting “The Corner” – a developers’ hub, where houses are advertised and plans for the new suburb are showcased. Next door there is a plain Dutch house with a Hills Hoist and an old brick outhouse in the back yard. Behind “The Corner”, on Bland St,

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STEVEN HERRICK,
AUTHOR



units have already replaced several demolished Dutch houses. You can fit several units, and therefore several more families, into the space in which one family lived in a Dutch house. Although they are more utilitarian, none has the charm or character of the buildings they replaced.

For now, the glacial pace at which suburban renewal is occurring leaves a highly unusual scene. Consolidated Properties’ Grantley says Coopers Plains has been stigmatised by its large concentration of public housing, believing that to be one of the reasons the vacant blocks were left alone for so long. Soon the “ghost suburb” will be a frenzy of construction, and then it will settle into its new ultra-modern reality. Aside from plans to maintain some small monuments to the Dutch houses, when Cornerstone Living is finished Coopers Plains will be almost unrecognisable.

The van Breemens, meanwhile, will hold firm as their suburb is reconfigured around them. Once a new immigrant himself, Fred is learning a few phrases of Mandarin in order to welcome the residents who have moved in. “That’s progress, you know?” says Marijke with a shrug. “What can you do about it?” ●