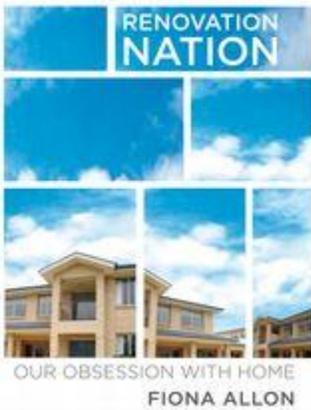


***Renovation Nation: Our Obsession with Home*** by Fiona Allon. Sydney: New South, 2008, pp. vi + 232, AUD \$34.95 Paperback, ISBN: 9780868408781.



Once there was a time when we quietly scrimped and saved for a home deposit and then went cap in hand and begged the bank manager for a loan ... [H]ome ownership was something you simply took for granted and expected in due course. ... [W]e devoted ourselves to paying the home loan back as quickly as possible. If landing the mortgage was good, paying it off was even better. Avoid risks, save for a rainy day, plan for the long term.

These were the simple and straightforward rules of earlier generations. Prosperity has changed all that, it changed everything. It has encouraged us to become absorbed in what Australians like best: our homes. It extends to everything to do with homes and housing: house prices and property values, interest rates and mortgages, investment properties and home improvements. We're obsessed.

So argues Fiona Allon, who is a Research Fellow with the Centre for Cultural Research at the University of Western Sydney, in this new book. She contends that Australians have become increasingly obsessed with home ownership, convinced of the financial gain to be made and the certainty of increased social well-being. The constant construction of extensions, upgrades and improvements has become normal practice. Not content with the one property as 'the home', many people have acquired an additional property, sometimes even a third, for the sole purpose of generating greater wealth.

In 1996 Australia elected John Howard as prime minister, a man who understood better than his opponents the meaning of 'home' to Australians. As he remarked, 'I believe that the concept of home is a compelling notion in our psyche'. Increased home ownership was equated with liberal values, freedom, choice, privacy, social integration and harmony.

Home ownership increased rapidly after the Second World War to seventy per cent. Consistently promoted over alternative forms of housing provision, it is the Australian Dream, for rich and poor, equated with identity and citizenship. It has historical, political and cultural weight, as well as financial incentives and inducements.

This book is about more than simple home renovation. As well as a domestic story, it is a national narrative. It spells out the consequences for our economy, our political system and our society. So what are the consequences? Has the obsession become a neurosis, with increasing insecurity and paranoia of possible repossession?

I think so. The initial notions of social control, comfort, security and retreat are fast fading. Since this book was published, the mortgage stress already affecting Australian homeowners has been exacerbated by the global economic crisis and consequent credit crunch. Mortgage foreclosure and home repossession are daily events and the subject of media news reports. How the present Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, will deal with the crisis remains to be seen; possibly with government pressure on banks and lenders, or maybe some form of financial aid. Whatever measures are taken, the Australian Dream has taken a battering, and it will take something more than an injection of funds to bring back the old feeling of well-being of previous generations.

KARL PHILLIPS ROLENEC  
London