

An homage to a hidden city oasis

Here's what it was like to live in the soon-to-be demolished Elouera flats.

Ashley St George

I WAS one of the lucky few to live at the Elouera flats, at 90 Northbourne Avenue. The space behind that tangled mass of wisteria, secretive and curious, due to be devastatingly flattened this month to turn the 16 units into more than 100 apartments.

Well here is a glimpse of what it was like.

On first glance they were seriously dilapidated, overgrown with vines as if nature was claiming them, laden with layers of graffiti and unquestionably needing some repairs. Taking the narrow footpath behind the garages led you to a backyard, opening out into an oasis at the back of the block the same size as the units - unheard of in the rest of the concrete jungle. Lush bamboo, lawn, abundant vegetable garden and hills hoisted made up the idyllic city backyard, a space shared with possums and once a wombat.

I remember the first time I was ever led into the backyard, by my new boyfriend who lived at the flats. I was slightly wary, given the decrepit vibe. But the quietness and peacefulness instantly hit me. Barely any car noise could be heard, no hubbub of the restaurants and city life - amazing for being only a step back from Northbourne Avenue and Lonsdale Street.

Some dusty steps led to a solid wooden door, opening into an apartment of merely two rooms. It was surprisingly modern for being built in the 1960s, with an open-plan living area, high ceilings and wooden floorboards. The entire side facing Elouera Street was floor-to-ceiling windows, behind the curtain of wisteria vines. Light streamed in, casting shadows across the walls that gently shimmered as the leaves moved in the breeze.

The in-built kitchen took up about a third of the living area, and thankfully my boyfriend had taken out some bottom cupboards to put in a dishwasher. There was no hot water in this kitchen, so a dishwasher was a must.

A functioning fireplace took pride of place on one of the side walls, and was the only form of heating. It be-



The building was overgrown with vines as if nature was claiming them. Pictures by Ashley St George



The rooms had an open-plan living area, high ceilings and wooden floorboards.

came a cherished daily ritual to come home in winter and light a fire, stand as close as you could without touching the handle for the vent, which got incredibly hot.

The bedroom was huge, with deep in-built cupboards much like a Mary Poppins handbag. My boyfriend, the thrifty and inventive type, had made a bed frame of milk crates (apparently they're great for aeration), but they starkly contrasted with the sleek wooden bedside tables and headboard built into the room.

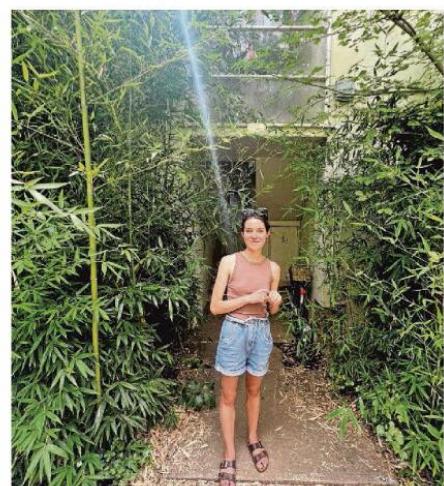
The narrow bathroom was covered in light blue tiles and had a combined bath and shower. The inventive boyfriend made a platform over half of the bath to house a washing machine.

Sure, there were elements that needed repair, with the rubber from the steps eroding, wooden doors wearing away and a massive sweep needed, but the bones of the building were unparalleled. With no heating except the fireplace and no cooling, the apartments remained liveable all year round due to their solid double-brick

construction. They were exceptionally quiet inside, so it was easy to forget you lived on Northbourne Avenue. And all the fit out was original - I don't know what apartments built now would last that long.

But things didn't need to be perfect for me to love the flats as I did. In fact there were many moments that were less than perfect. Like when a plumber came to unblock the pipes, and the toilet water shot out of the bowl so violently it covered the bathroom ceiling.

Our landlord owned half



The back of the block was the same size as the units, with lush bamboo, lawn and a vegetable garden.

of the apartments, including ours, and it was a very lax arrangement. There were no inspections, so she had no idea that my partner had pulled up the carpet. The odd phone call to her requesting maintenance was met with a rent increase, which is partly why we put up with no hot water in the kitchen. I give her credit for bringing together a bohemian bunch of tenants over the years, and because there were only the 16 flats, everyone knew everyone in a sitcom type of way. There

were public servants, exotic dancers, a funeral director, photographers, musicians. People bonded over keeping non-residents out of the dirt carpark, often by hilariously squirting tomato sauce under people's car door handles. I offer no apology to anyone reading this who may have been affected.

Unlike some of the long-term residents, I was only a blip in the lifespan of these beautiful flats. If only their double-brick walls could talk, I'm sure they would have some stories to tell.