

SUE WALKER

The Australian Home Beautiful and William Shum, editor, 1926–46

This article draws on research I carried out as an honorary fellow of State Library Victoria for my forthcoming book, *The unknown story of William Shum, editor of Australian Home Beautiful, 1926–1946* (to be published by The Beagle Press), which tells the story of my grandfather William Arthur Somerset Shum and his influence on the making of modern Australia. For my research I relied almost entirely on the Library's extensive collections, in particular the diary and letter book of William Shum's father, Arthur Hall Shum; the holdings of *The Australian Home Beautiful*, *The New Idea* and *Everylady's Journal*; and William Shum's brother-in-law William Moore's publications *City Sketches* and *Studio Sketches*. The Library holds the complete collection of *Home Beautiful* – an important reference source for contemporary scholars that shows how the Australian dream of home ownership that emerged in the interwar period was nurtured and shaped during Shum's editorship. Shum introduced fresh ideas, and specifically modernism, to his readers and profoundly influenced their homes and gardens.



The Australian Home Beautiful: A Journal for the Home Builder was first published under that name in October 1925; however, the Herald and Weekly Times had been publishing its precursor, the property magazine *The Real Property*

F Hedley Sanders, cover illustration, *Australian Home Beautiful*, vol. 15, no. 2, 1 February 1937, PER 720.5 R22. Courtesy Sanders family

The Australian HOME BEAUTIFUL

1/-

FEBRUARY 1, 1937

Registered at the General Post Office, Melbourne
for transmission by post as a periodical.



Annual, annually since 1912. Edited by the newspaper's property editor Richard Moorhead, it covered real-estate highlights of the year together with photographs of houses and gardens. In 1922, with Moorhead remaining as editor, it became a quarterly magazine with a more popular focus on homes and gardens, and its name changed to *The Australian Home Builder*. A further name change, to *The Australian Home Beautiful*, took place in October 1925 with a view to giving greater emphasis to charm in the home and capturing an even wider readership; at this point it became a monthly publication. Still in print today, the magazine has been known commonly since that time as *Home Beautiful*, but its full title marked it apart from the English and American home magazines that were popular in the 1920s and confirmed its editorial policy to celebrate Australia's national spirit and qualities of home, garden and way of life.

Moorhead retired in 1925, and from 1926 to 1946 its editor was William Shum, who for the preceding 23 years had been the founding editor of another magazine, *The New Idea: A Women's Home Journal for Australasia*. Shum was born in 1875 and led a life overflowing with energy and activity until his death, in 1961. He worked as a journalist and editor and was also a practical man, making furniture in his workshop, propagating new strains of plants in his garden, tending his chickens and developing and printing his own photographs. In 1905 he married Edith Moore, whose brother was William Moore the arts writer and whose father, Thompson Moore, was a member of parliament and director of the Melbourne *Herald* from 1894 until 1912.

Enormous social change took place in Australia while Shum was at *Home Beautiful*. Having survived World War I and the disruption caused by the 'Spanish' influenza pandemic, which reached Australia in 1919, Australians were eager for a new way of life. The most fundamental change in the 1920s was a huge growth in home ownership. At the start of the decade only about 30 per cent of homes in Australian cities were owner occupied,¹ but with soldiers returning from the war, picking up their lives and wanting to settle down in homes of their own, legislative changes gave lower income families the chance to own a house. A massive building program took place. Slums were cleared and whole new suburbs created. When Shum's editorship began, the building programs were well underway.

Shum's many interests, which laid the ground for his years at *Home Beautiful*, flourished at 'Clanrye', the Shums' rambling family home and garden, with its extensive outhouses, including stables and an aviary, on the beachfront at Brighton. Shum's creative approach to homemaking, which he shared with his wife and their wider family, and his enjoyment of artists and



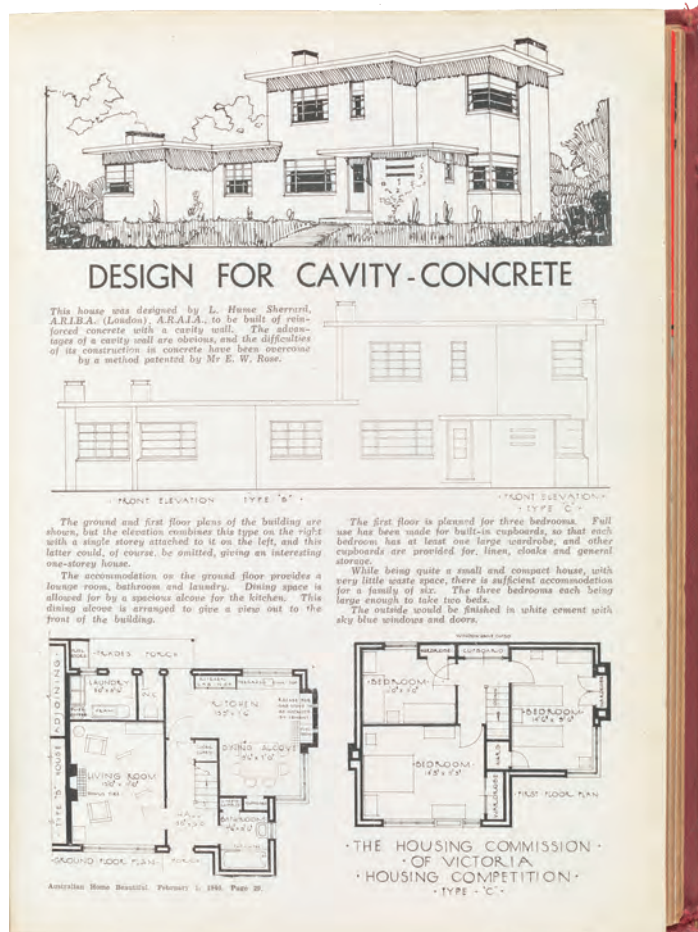
William Arthur Somerset Shum. Courtesy Shum family

their work influenced much of the publication's content. As Julie Oliver, a journalist and former contributor to *Home Beautiful*, observed,

Although *Home Beautiful* started life as a nuts-and-bolts magazine for the home builder, it was clear from the beginning that there was more to making a home than merely bricks and mortar ... that mysterious art which is second nature to a few and completely baffling to everyone else found its place in the magazine from the start.²

During Shum's editorship, *Home Beautiful's* popularity grew rapidly. Many Australians had been ready for such a publication and took it up with enthusiasm. After just one year, the editorial in February 1927 noted, the magazine was 'constantly receiving letters from people who [had] received valuable help from the pages of the *Home Beautiful*'.³ Manufacturers and suppliers understood the magazine's impact and advertised heavily in its pages. By late 1928 its circulation had reached 18,699, 'a leap of 5000 in just five months',⁴ well beyond that achieved by its predecessors. For many households the magazine became a kind of 'bible', offering inspiration and practical advice, and encouraging an expanded and satisfying way of life; with its monthly nationwide readership, its influence on Australian culture was immense.





L Hume Sherrard, architectural drawings, in 'Design for cavity-concrete', *Australian Home Beautiful*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1 February 1940, p. 29, PER 720.5 R22. Courtesy Sherrard family

Shum's first issue of *Home Beautiful* followed a format that showed little variation throughout the ensuing years. The editorial was enthusiastic and inviting. It promised the publication would be 'an Australian magazine of which everyone may be proud and to which readers will look forward with eagerness'. And while it would maintain 'all the features that interest those concerned in planning and constructing a home', it would also 'expand that section dealing with the practical and beautiful sides of home-making'.⁵

Bringing the engaging approach of *New Idea* and its popular homemaking stories together with the practical building content of the earlier property journals, *Home Beautiful* was set to become a magazine of great value for the mid-1920s. It straddled the worlds of professional architecture and building journals and popular interest magazines, being practical, informative, inspirational and accessible, and appealing to both male and female readers.

Articles discussed architecture, building, design, home decoration



F Hedley Sanders, cover illustration, *Australian Home Beautiful*, vol. 5, no. 7, 1 July 1927, PER 720.5 R22. Courtesy Sanders family

and maintenance, furniture, cookery, gardens, new devices, art and artists, handicrafts and other allied subjects. They reflected the mix of Australian houses, architectural styles and international influences prominent at the time and were designed to help readers create homes that they enjoyed. Lively and varied coverage of the natural and built environments, together with unexpected and quirky stories illustrated with diagrams, drawings and photographs, made for fascinating reading. Shum had great respect for architects and regularly published their articles, including drawings and plans. The issue for February 1940 reproduced drawings by architect L Hume Sherrard, my father, who was a regular contributor to the magazine, showing a concrete house with cavity walls (see page 44). Concrete was a new wonder material that Shum had promoted since his first issue, writing numerous articles about it himself.

FEBRUARY 1, 1932

ONE SHILLING

The Australian HOME BEAUTIFUL

29 JAN 1932
OF VICTORIA

Registered at the General Post Office, Melbourne,
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ELECTRICITY IN THE KITCHEN

F Hedley Sanders, cover illustrations, *Australian Home Beautiful*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1 February 1932, PER 720.5 R22 (above); vol. 13, no. 5, 1 May 1935, National Library of Australia, N 690.5 (opposite). Courtesy Sanders family

MAY 1, 1935

ONE SHILLING

The Australian

HOME BEAUTIFUL



The Most Discussed House in Melbourne

LOVELY GARDENS AND BEAUTIFUL HOUSES

During Shum's first year as editor, the magazine's covers were unexciting, making limited use of colour and featuring unimaginative designs. However, in his second year, a dramatic change took place. A young commercial artist, Frank Hedley Sanders, made an unprompted visit to Shum with a folio of work including a delightful coloured drawing that he suggested as a cover for the magazine. Shum accepted it, and Sanders's work, shown on page 45, appeared as the cover of the July 1927 issue. According to historian and author Peter Cuffley, who recorded this incident in his book *Australian houses of the '20s and '30s*, Sanders considered the earlier *Home Beautiful* covers to be 'very frowsy'. Perhaps Shum had been of the same opinion: Cuffley reported that on seeing Sanders's first cover proposal, Shum said, 'Well, what will you do for next month's cover?'⁶

Sanders was a contributor to *Home Beautiful* for the next 15 years. Countless examples of his full-colour cover pictures have been reproduced in articles and journals and are instantly recognisable. The cover design for February 1937, shown on page 41, with its welcoming entry porch and colourful garden beds, typifies the magazine's message. As Cuffley said, 'It is important to understand the profound influence of those colour pages of *Home Beautiful*: the covers captured the dream of the ideal home'.⁷

Sanders was a fine draughtsman and particularly talented with water colour. He would highlight the subjects found in each month's issue; for example, his cover for February 1932 illustrated a feature article by S Parke encouraging readers to use electricity in their kitchens (see page 46).⁸ Other Sanders covers depicted different architectural styles as they emerged. A startling image on the cover in May 1935, reproduced on page 47, illustrated an article by Nora Cooper titled 'A very much discussed house'. Designed by architects Yuncken, Freeman and Freeman, the house, which had white-painted concrete walls and steel window frames, aroused strong feelings at the time and was compared, disparagingly or with humour, to a factory, a ship and a machine.⁹

Sanders later became an industrial designer, but he continued to produce *Home Beautiful* covers until April 1944, not long before Shum's own retirement, thus maintaining the presence of his art on almost every cover of the magazine during Shum's editorship.



There was a strong, loyal group of staff writers at *Home Beautiful* when Shum arrived. They were garden writer Edna Walling; Alex Smith, whose practical



William Shum, *How the architect transformed the ruins of the old lime kiln on the beach*, in W.A.S. [William Shum], 'A most uncommon bathing box', *Australian Home Beautiful*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1 February 1930, p. 36, PER 720.5 R22. Courtesy Shum family

wood-working pieces corresponded with Shum's furniture-making interests; Nora Cooper, whose thoughtful and outspoken views were an important influence on people's lives and homes; and Irish-born Ruth Poole-Lane, who provided fascinating insights about interiors and other people's houses. All four contributed to *Home Beautiful* throughout Shum's editorship.

Shum continually sought out new stories and writers, and he was connected to a wide group of specialists who became contributors. Henrietta Walker, for instance, who wrote about handicrafts, followed Shum to *Home Beautiful* from *New Idea*, and a range of experts in other fields added variety and interest to the pages of the magazine, providing inspiration for a more imaginative way of life. Some continued on an irregular basis over many years.

While acknowledging the value of using skilled experts where needed, the magazine's writers encouraged both men and women to undertake do-it-yourself projects in their homes. Shum also invited comments and contributions from *Home Beautiful's* readers:

If ... you know a short cut to the feeding of poultry, if you know of a quick, inexpensive and easy method of doing any odd job about the home, if you can make a labour-saving gadget or construct an easier chair than the ordinary kind, or a nattier fly-blind – why not let others share the benefit of your knowledge?¹⁰

Regular competitions with cash prizes were well received by the magazine's proud home-owning subscribers, who sent in floor plans, photographs and written descriptions for such topics as 'the best little house I know', 'the prettiest house in Australia' and 'the ideal home'. Delighted by the response to an early competition but disappointed by the quality of readers' photographs, Shum reacted with a directness that characterised his editorial comments:

In a recent competition in which a prize of Five Pounds was offered for photographs of the prettiest Australian home, only 5 per cent of the pictures sent it had any pictorial merit. The time is evidently ripe for a series of instructive articles on Home Photography ... telling readers how to photograph their homes, their rooms, their treasures, their gardens, their pets, and their children.¹¹

Always keen to give the magazine visual appeal, Shum included many images to supplement the written word. Walling's magical garden plans were like sensitively drawn works of art (some examples can be seen in Olga Tsara's article in this issue, on page 34). In addition, Smith's clear, practical sketches of how to make useful objects brought human warmth and creative energy to the pages of print, as did Shum's own photographs. Most of the latter were unacknowledged, but where they illustrated writing attributed to WA Somerset, or 'W.A.S.', his photographs received acknowledgement. In 'A most uncommon bathing box', in the February 1930 issue, Shum described with some humour the conversion of a derelict lime kiln at the base of a cliff in Sorrento, on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula, into 'a fine, commodious bathing box'.¹² A small sketch of the ground plan was included, together with three large photographs, one of which is reproduced on page 49.



Space limitations preclude a full account of William Shum's contribution to modern Australia through his editorship of *The Australian Home Beautiful*, but my research at State Library Victoria has shown that as the dream of owning a single house and garden on a separate block of land became a reality for many Australians, Shum and his magazine provided guidance in building that dream. His readiness to embrace fresh ideas equipped him to steer his readers into the future, making *Home Beautiful* an important influence as the foundations of modern Australia were laid.