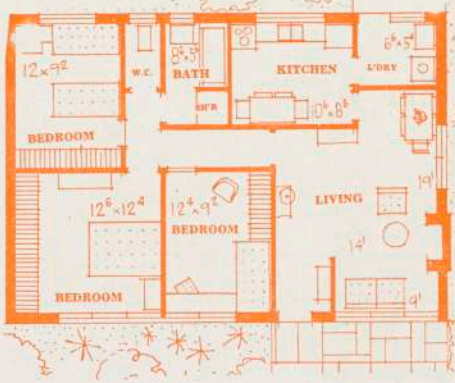




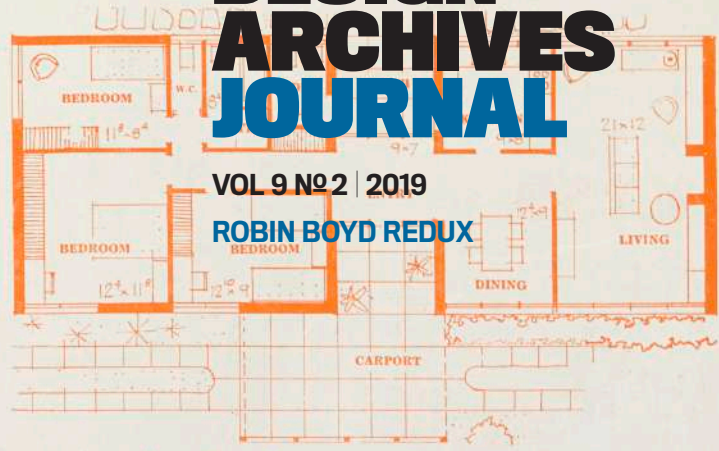
This is the cheapest three-bedroom brick veneer house it is possible to build today. It is 10 squares in area and provides three ample bedrooms, a separate w.c., shower recess, eating space in the kitchen and a pleasant livingroom with large windows. It will fit on a 50' block or lengthwise on 40'. Current estimate £2840.

V339



RMIT DESIGN ARCHIVES JOURNAL

VOL 9 No2 | 2019
ROBIN BOYD REDUX



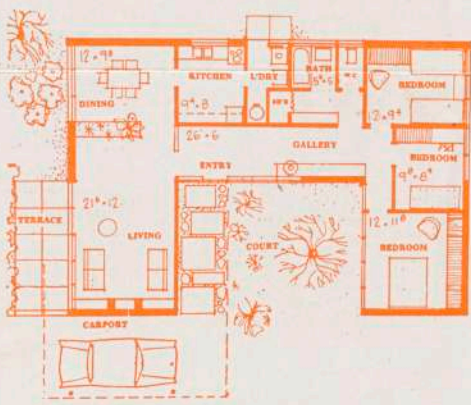
V343

A ranch style for a very wide block (90') this plan gives four main rooms and a hall across the facade. The sleeping and living areas are grouped each in a separate block linked by a glazed gallery. On the other hand this is an ideal plan for the narrow block (35'). When used this way the car port should be placed front or rear. A long, low gable continues uninterrupted over front and rear porches, giving an unbroken line to the house. 12 squares. Current estimate £3360.



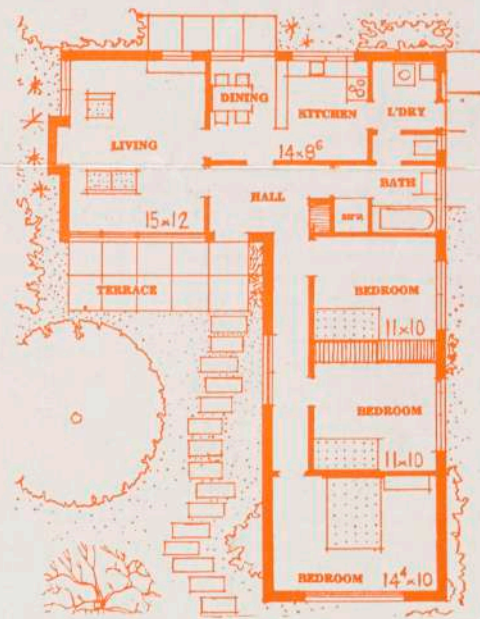
U-shaped plan which is equally suitable for across or end-on placement. When placed lengthwise on an average-sized block, the court becomes a private outdoor living area. The car port is cleverly integrated with the main house by being covered with an over-sweep of the front gable. Building regulations require the livingroom to be separated from the diningroom by at least a half wall. This allows for a very small bedroom or study. 12½ squares in area. Current estimate £370.

V340

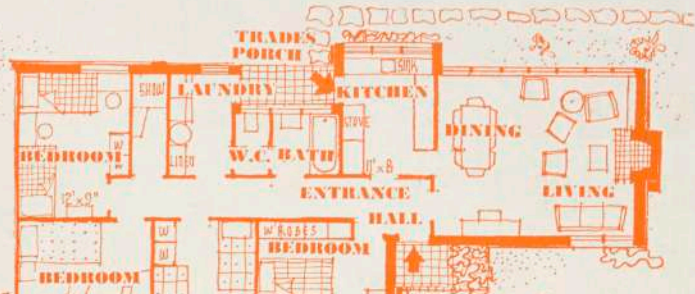


An ever-popular L-shape. In this version the dining space is cleverly linked with the kitchen leaving the livingroom intact so that its furniture may not suffer from constant use. Plumbing is economically grouped and bedrooms are generous. 10½ squares, it will fit on a 46' block. Current estimate £2960.

V344



An unusual house featuring a great amount of open planning in the form of a sweeping livingroom, study, diningroom and kitchen right across the front of the house. An ideal home for land with a front view. Modern oil heaters now





RMIT DESIGN ARCHIVES JOURNAL

VOL 9 Nº2 2019

ROBIN BOYD REDUX



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Cover
Royal Victorian Institute of Architects and the Small Homes Service, *The Age*, '20 plans brick veneer: Selected from the full range of 300 modern designs, Small Homes Service', Small Homes Service, no. 18, Melbourne: The Service, (1959) courtesy State Library of Victoria Rare Books Collection.

Inside Cover
The Denheld Family's T320 home under construction in East Burwood. Courtesy the Denheld Family

Below
Mark Strizic, Portrait of Robin Boyd, 1970, © 2019 Estate of Mark Strizic, courtesy National Portrait Gallery

Jacket
Robin Boyd, Aerogramme letter to Roy Grounds and Frederick Romberg, 14 November '56, donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gift Program in memory of Frederick Romberg and Robin Boyd, 2008. © 2019 Estate of Robin Boyd, courtesy Robin Boyd Foundation. © 2019 Diane Masters

This issue was generously supported by the Isaacson Davis Foundation

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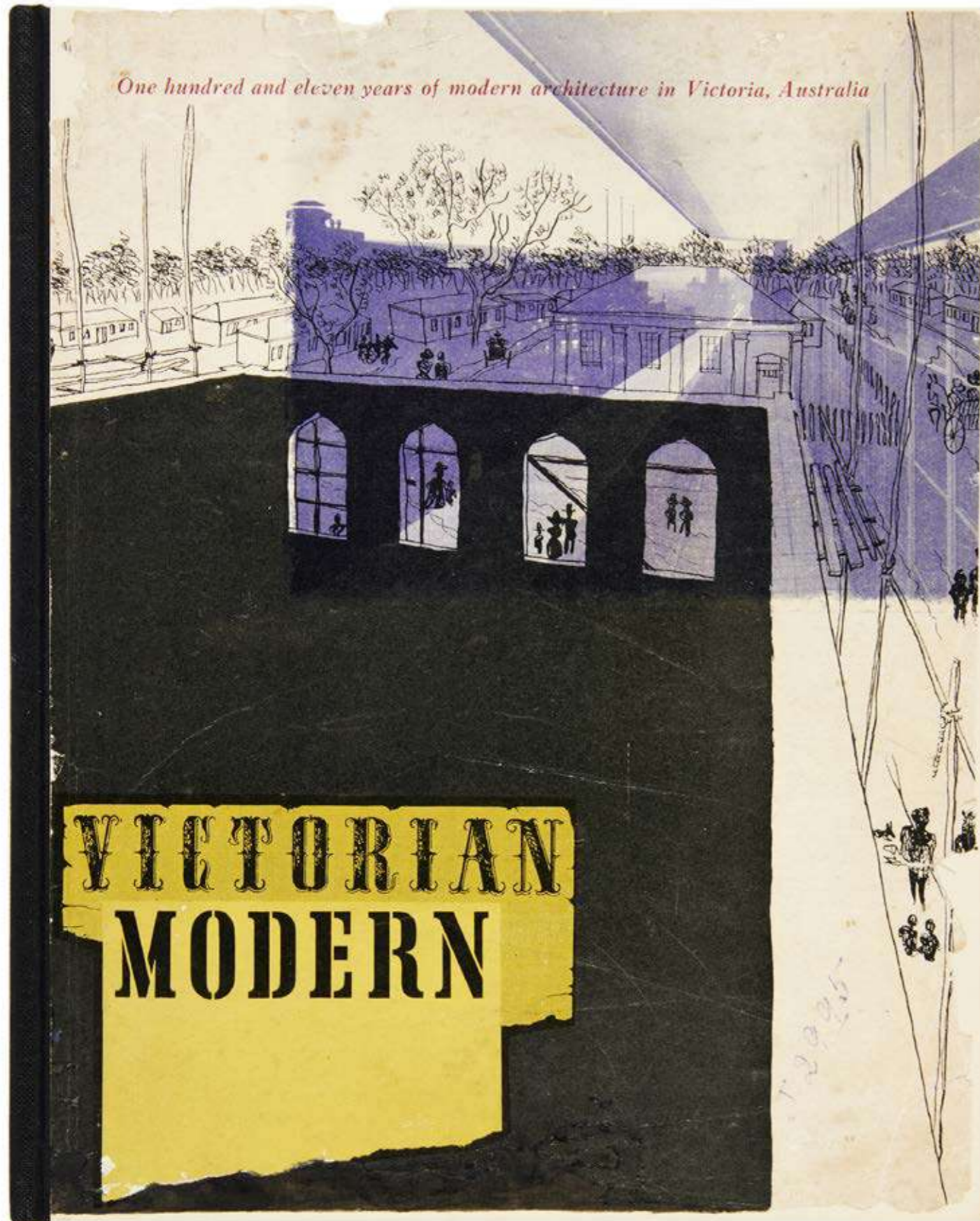
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Harriet Edquist





2019 marks the centenary of the birth of Melbourne architect and writer Robin Boyd, and the thirty-year anniversary of a two-day event comprising a public symposium, exhibition, publications and building tour dedicated to Robin Boyd.

It was titled “Robin Boyd: The Architect as Critic”. The 1989 inquiries into Boyd as a writer and Australian public intellectual resulted in a lengthy special issue of *Transition* magazine that subsequently remained the standard reference work on Boyd, his buildings and his writings. This issue of the *RMIT Design Archives Journal* reunites the original curatorial team behind the 1989 festival of Boyd. In so doing it continues the line of inquiry initiated at the end of the 1980s into Robin Boyd’s place within a broader Australian cultural landscape. The public production and reception of Boyd’s writing, criticism and commentary was made possible by mid- twentieth century media and media networks. His work circulated through books, little magazines, broadsheet newspapers, broadcast radio, television, exhibitions and international expositions. For these reasons this issue is focussed on Robin Boyd and the media, a lens that allows us to examine two themes. Firstly, Boyd’s work was shaped by the notion of a mass public audience and problems of culture in an era of new mass cultural forms. Secondly, by tracing Boyd’s place within media networks researchers are able to pinpoint and understand some of the sources and interlocutors that formed the basis for his own position.

Mass public audience.

The implied presence of an audience informed media formats. Boyd’s work in varied media helped construct readers and viewers for his writings and architecture. Writing for or making media raised new questions about the role of architecture, design and urbanism in mass market culture. His early columns and opinion pieces for the newspapers first brought his work to a large public audience, as the post-war problem of housing shortages sparked a bigger debate on mass housing. A Small Homes Service (SHS) staffed by architects was first proposed by the New South Wales Institute of Architects, but the Victorian division was the first to open shop. It operated from 1947-1968.¹ In both states the service was publicised and promoted through an alliance of newspapers, architects and department stores. Department stores invested in the growth of post-war consumption in anticipation of a consumer market for interior decoration and furniture. A shortage of materials and a desire for a new post-war modernity ensured the positive reception of the Small Homes Service’s minimal, spare, functional house designs.

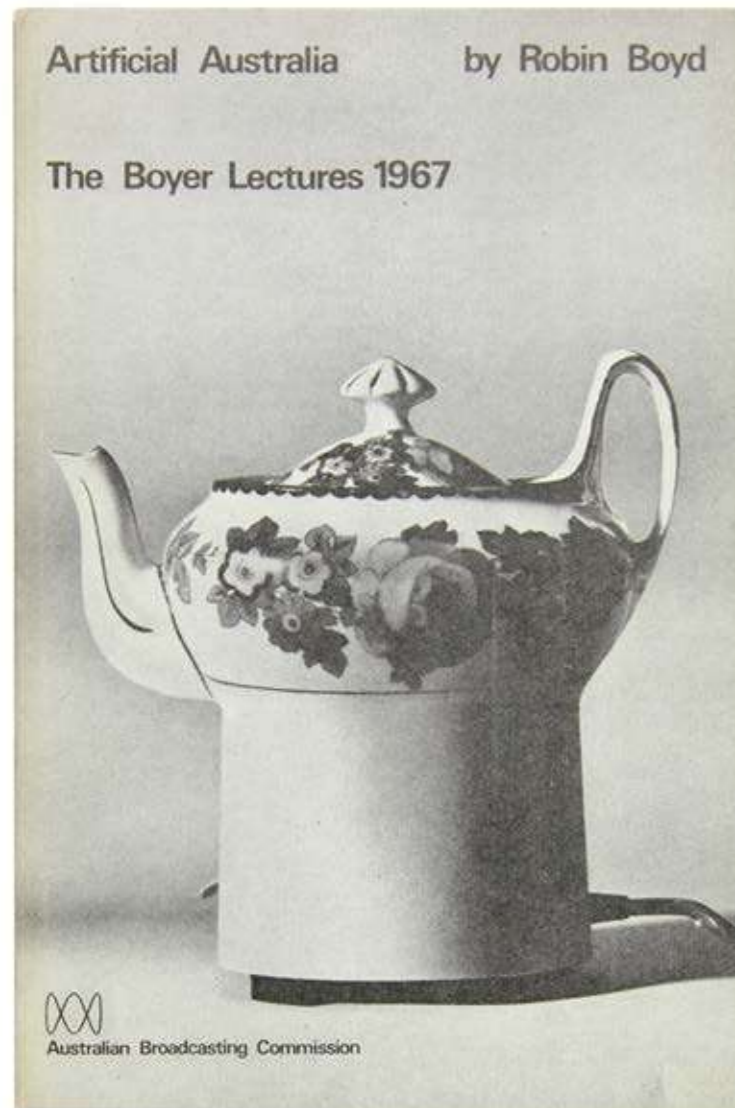
As both Hyde and Mannering observe, the newspaper and shop-front bureaux were crucial tools in building a mass audience. Hyde notes, that what set the Small Homes Service apart from its predecessors, and a key factor determining its success, was its connection to the media: “Boyd had a natural sense for communication through word and image, taking technical drawings and reframing them in an accessible manner” and “To capture attention, he would spin sensational headlines”. In her essay Virginia Mannering notes the “outsized contribution” of the Small Homes Service to a larger architectural discussion, and to the lives of their occupants. In a time of ongoing discussions about material shortages, labour politics and a distrust of socialism, she observes that the Small Homes Service had to position itself around these contested topics, seemingly avoiding larger, heated and dangerous discourse.

From the start the Small Homes Service set up an emphasis on dialogue, its role as a service, rather than an object imposed on people. Audiences were actively encouraged to post questions and responses to columns, and occasionally newly built homes were revisited as proto-post occupancy studies. Potential home builders could discuss their favourite plan and have it modified according to their particular needs and wishes. A photograph of one family who purchased the Service’s plan records their tent pitched across planks on the joists of their incomplete house. Mannering argues that this key image reinforces the agency, participation and accessibility of the audience in this project. As both Hyde and Mannering argue, the columns, reader questions, photographs and oral histories are critical pieces of evidence for constructing the role of audience and reception.

As Philip Goad’s essay demonstrates, Boyd’s desire to reach and influence a mass audience, was propelled by his advocacy of the architectural profession. Using the prism of vernacular building Goad examines Boyd’s insistent focus on the ordinary home over a long period from 1947-1962, a focus that allowed him to promote the superiority of the architect-designed house. His advocacy however, was founded on a number of exclusions: of Indigenous architecture, of the post-war vernacular of the migrant home and the work and research of emigre architects. Goad’s analysis adds to the historical contextualisation and critical scrutiny undertaken by all writers in this special issue.

¹ The Small Homes Service in its established format effectively ceased operation in March 1968. However, in April 1968 the project evolved into an advisory housing service that continued across the 1970s before folding in 1979.

Opposite
Robin Boyd, *Victorian Modern: One Hundred and Eleven Years of Modern Architecture in Victoria, Australia* (Melbourne: Architectural Students’ Society of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects, 1947), RMIT University Library Special Collection, Peter Corrigan Collection. © 2019 Estate of Robin Boyd, courtesy Robin Boyd Foundation



Networks

Other media formats, notably, influential international architectural journals such as the English *The Architectural Review*, provided Boyd with a rich source of debate on post-war reconstruction, the heritage value of the built environment, mass housing and critically the problem of architecture and mass taste at a time of transition in formative ideas about culture. In architecture the issue of mass taste was theorised through the spectre of suburbia, suburban ugliness and the infrastructure networks of highways, electricity wires, billboards and roadside signs. Arguably a number of writers clustered around *The Architectural Review* such as Osbert Lancaster and Ian Nairn provided Boyd with his acerbic and pithy writing voice and also offered him a distinctive line drawing style that he freely adapted. As John Macarthur argues, Boyd shares with the *AR* a strategy of deploying ugliness to ask “what role architectural expertise ought to have in a liberal society where all have a right to express their taste.” At the close of his essay Macarthur asserts that “A final point to make lies in observing that *The Australian Ugliness*, like the *AR*’s campaigns apparently addresses a wide public, but is really written for architects”. Questions of implied audience and address are crucial components of research on architecture in the media.

Boyd’s views on taste and audience were also formed in concert with local intellectual networks. Karen Burns discusses Boyd’s long association with the Melbourne literary journal *Meanjin*. This magazine and its social circle offered Boyd intellectual companionship and stimulation, occasional writing opportunities, and a rich cauldron of debates on art, literature and architecture. *Meanjin*’s editor Clem Christesen was a keen reader of international periodicals such as the *Times Literary Supplement*, the *New Statesman* and the *Partisan Review*. These networks in turn influenced the editorial direction of the journal and the commissions and intellectual climate it would offer Boyd. The shape of these discussions was inflected by hopes for a socially progressive post-war Australia, hopes subsequently eroded by the terrors and problems of the cold war period. Burns’s essay investigates the way in which Boyd’s architectural histories were animated by *Meanjin*’s vision of culture and the problems of taste, mass audiences and the minority cultural leadership of the avant-garde.

In the 1960s international networks first forged in the late 1940s delivered a more global audience for Boyd’s writings with books commissioned by New York based publisher George Braziller. These included for example, Boyd’s study of Kenzo Tange (1962). In addition, the 1960s brought new media opportunities. Like English art historian Kenneth Clark, Robin Boyd appeared on television, with a three-part series on the government television channel, the ABC. These scripts were a collaboration between Boyd and Australian historian Manning Clark and University of Melbourne politics academic Alan Fraser Davies whose work connected ideals of democracy to the Australian way of life. The third and final part of this series, “The Changing Place of Australian Cities” was broadcast at “tea” time, 6.30pm on 21 September 1961. It brought together a number

of Boyd’s established interests: a keen desire to introduce the public to an idiosyncratic stylistic classification system, a pithy historical narrative culminating in the emergence of modernism, and a key distinction between the designer and role of the “amateur”. Boyd in suit and tie seated at a drawing board presented the professional architect at work. His invitation to deliver the Boyer Lectures on ABC Radio in 1967, brought another opportunity to broadcast a history and views of Australian design and the state of the nation. These radio transmissions were published as a small pamphlet titled *Artificial Australia*.

Boyd like a number of key international architects, became more interested in new media during the 1960s. Christine Phillips and Peter Raisbeck’s essay discusses the new media formats Boyd used in the Australian pavilions at the international ‘Expos’ of Montreal (1967) and Osaka (1970). These installations brought new collaborators into Boyd’s orbit; with George Farwell, author of numerous books on Australian history and the Australian way of life at Montreal, and with composer George Dreyfus and artist Stan Ostojka-Kotkowski at Osaka. In these expositions multi-media happenings were used to present narratives of the Australian way of life and of Australian cultural and economic modernity. The multi-media installations at international expositions also marked the mainstream acceptance and embrace of experimental performance approaches to space first pioneered by younger architectural collectives.

While the articles in this issue focus on published work, Harriet Edquist suggests what might be at stake by attending to office communication and correspondence as a form of architectural practice. By focussing on the letters held in the Design Archives between Boyd, Romberg and Grounds in the year Boyd was in the United States (1956–57), she suggests ways in which the idea of a design practice and authorship might be critiqued and broadened. The archive has also provided a thread throughout this issue of the journal. Traces of Peter Corrigan’s sustained interest in Boyd can be gleaned from both Corrigan’s library, donated to the RMIT Library and now held in its Special Collections and the Edmond and Corrigan practice archive donated to the Design Archives by Maggie Edmond and Matthew Corrigan. The book collection evidences Corrigan’s alert awareness of Boyd’s public persona while the beautifully presented copy of *The Walls Around Us* in its custom-made archival box suggests the care with which Corrigan considered his historical lineage. A reference Boyd wrote for him in November 1965 and Boyd’s reply to Corrigan’s gift of Philadelphia architect Robert Venturi’s 1966 book, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* suggest a subtly ambivalent relationship; on the one hand Boyd is represented as an early mentor to Corrigan and on the other, as a figure from an older generation about to be taken over by the younger. Edmond and Corrigan and Venturi and Scott Brown embraced the everyday vernacular architecture of mass culture that Boyd had desperately attempted to counter. Indeed, Corrigan’s proposed Foreword to the 1985 edition of *Australia’s Home* which was rejected by the publisher highlights the generational fault lines that were

to drive the embrace of post-modernism in Melbourne.² Corrigan tempers his admiration of Boyd with criticism, ending ‘the ambivalence towards suburbia evident in this book is no longer shared by a new generation of architects and artists. . . The point now is to accept Boyd’s suburbia as a site for dealing with questions of human existence. These Australian homes are not aesthetic calamities; they can and do nourish an imaginative world and constitute a region for the spirit’.

Corrigan’s speech notes to his talk at the relaunch of *The Australian Ugliness* in 2010 show that while he still clearly admired Boyd he did not share his ideas about the Australian public or the ‘ugliness’. Corrigan’s engagement with Boyd therefore offers a suggestive direction for future work dedicated to examining Boyd’s architectural reception. This is evident in the voices of a younger generation of architects who were to re-position Melbourne as a centre of architectural thought in the 1980s.

Viewing Boyd through the prism of media enables us to study better his influences, interlocutors and collaborators. Expanding his constellation of influences takes us beyond the familiar accounts of his intellectual context; beyond for example, the influence of his uncle, novelist Martin Boyd or satirist Barry Humphries, the two stars with whom his Australian work is frequently aligned. Although his connection to *The Architectural Review* is also frequently noted, as John Macarthur’s essay demonstrates, new insights can be gleaned from studying how Boyd transformed and reworked his source material, including his drawing idiom. As Macarthur demonstrates, such a study can unearth subtleties within Boyd’s spiky account of the suburbs. There remain many other contributing voices, sources and debates in Boyd’s intellectual network that warrant further investigation. The contribution of Virginia Mannering and Rory Hyde demonstrates other paths for future action, with more attention to reception on the one hand and on the other, the value of history as an overlooked archive of possibilities for contemporary architectural action.

Harriet Edquist and Karen Burns, Editors

² Corrigan’s original typescript of the Foreword and the typeset version by Penguin Books are held in the RMIT Design Archives, Edmond and Corrigan Collection. See also University of Melbourne Archives, Melbourne University Press Archives, MUP 2003.0129, File Unit 11, BOYD 1952-1986. Letter Patricia Davies to Peter Ryan, October 9, 1985. The Foreword was subsequently published in *The Writings of Maggie Edmond and Peter Corrigan* (Melbourne: Schwartz Transition Monographs 1996), 90-93.

Opposite
Robin Boyd,
Artificial Australia,
The Boyer Lectures
1967, (Sydney:
Australian Broadcasting
Commission),
RMIT Design Archives
collection, Roy Simpson
Collection,
©2019 Estate of Robin
Boyd, courtesy Robin
Boyd Foundation

Small Homes Section

A HOUSE DIVIDED

NUMBERS TIED IN THE Small Homes Section of today's issue are a house divided into two, for no one would expect to see a house divided into two. The living and sleeping quarters are separated by the private service of the kitchen.

THIS IS A TYPICAL SERVICE PLAN



This is Plan No. 117 of the SMALL HOMES SERVICE. Complete Architectural drawings, specifications and details of this and many other houses are available immediately.

"Zoned" Planning
The problem of zoning different sections in a house is a problem which is becoming more acute. The living and sleeping quarters are separated by the private service of the kitchen.

Saves Work
The advantage of value to every member of the family, it is better to have more than the necessary, with the possibility of adding to the house as the need arises.

When the house is designed to accommodate a growing family, the house has three bedrooms, a living room, and a kitchen. The house is designed to be a house which can be expanded as the need arises.

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SMALL HOMES

Offers Leading Architects' Services for the Smallest Home-Building Project

Next Monday, July 7, a new service will be open to the home-builders of Victoria. The Royal Victorian Institute of Architects, in conjunction with "The Age", will begin the operation of a professional advisory bureau, dispensing information, designs and complete architectural drawings at nominal cost. The Service will be centrally situated on the Ground Floor at 238-242 Flinders Street.

Architects' Pledge to Home-Builders

Mr. W. Ross-Godfrey, President of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects, welcomes the opening of the Small Homes Service Bureau.

In a statement yesterday, Mr. Godfrey said: "For years it has been a matter of deep concern to the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects that a general professional service should be made available to the small home owner. At times the difficulties which we have encountered in trying to bring this idea to fruition seemed almost insuperable, but it now appears that the ideal for which we have all been striving has become a reality."

Modern Character
In general appearance the house is modern, light and cheerful. The main structure has an appealing character, yet retains the traditional character of the Victorian house.

Individual Choice
The architect of your house is entitled to a certain amount of freedom in the choice of materials, colors, and finishes. The architect will be glad to advise you on the best choice of materials and finishes for your house.

Variety Plans
It is based on a large list of plans, and each plan is designed to meet the needs of a particular type of home. The plans are designed to be simple and practical, and to provide a high standard of living.

Service for Country
The Small Homes Service will be glad to advise you on the best choice of materials and finishes for your house. The architect will be glad to advise you on the best choice of materials and finishes for your house.

Personal Taste
The architect of your house is entitled to a certain amount of freedom in the choice of materials, colors, and finishes. The architect will be glad to advise you on the best choice of materials and finishes for your house.

What It Costs
The cost of a house is a matter of personal choice. The architect will be glad to advise you on the best choice of materials and finishes for your house.

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Utopia Weekly: Robin Boyd and the Small Homes Service

Rory Hyde

On Tuesday 1 July 1947 a brief notice appeared on the front page of *The Age*. "A new weekly feature of interest to all home owners, and of importance to all home builders, will start in *The Age* tomorrow. Every Wednesday," it announced, "in a page conducted with the advice of Melbourne's leading architects, the latest ideas in practical, economical small-house design will be illustrated and discussed. Questions will be answered, and advice will be given on land, finance and all aspects of building design and construction. Full details will be announced of the new SMALL HOMES SERVICE, operated by the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects, in conjunction with *The Age*."

With this modest announcement, the Small Homes Service was launched. Conceived as a public service design bureau, it would offer architect-designed house plans for sale to the public, as a means to address the housing shortage following the second world war. Led by Robin Boyd from 1947 to 1953, the Small Homes Service—and the associated weekly column in *The Age*, the Small Homes Section—would have an unprecedented impact on the design of the suburban home in Melbourne, and would seek to transform the level of public debate around ideas of aesthetics, planning, design, construction, and the values of the nation.

This essay will reflect on these first years of the Small Homes Service (SHS) under Boyd's leadership, examine its legacy, and ask what lessons could be drawn from it to address the housing crisis in Melbourne today.

The war, and the depression of the 1930s that preceded it, had left a huge shortfall in housing in Melbourne. After 1945, the city would open up, reaching beyond the old core neighbourhoods, spreading into the surrounding farmland to lay out the new subdivisions of Glen Iris, Coburg, Greensborough, Moorabbin, and Altona. Divided into quarter-acre blocks, these cleared rectangles of grassland would offer the promise of the suburban dream to returned service-men and -women, placed within reach thanks to war service bank loans.

size of homes. Prospective home-owners faced a complex landscape to navigate, with few institutions offering clarity and trust. It was against this backdrop that the Small Homes Service was born.

"Heedless of the trail of unsuccessful bureaux", Boyd wrote, "the Victorian Institute decided on one more attempt to save the public from itself".⁴ The Small Homes Service of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects in conjunction with *The Age*, its full title, was established in July 1947. Boyd was appointed as director, despite his young age and relative lack of experience in building. Neil Clerehan, who would serve as Boyd's assistant, reflected that "It seem[ed] more than luck, more like a miracle, that he was chosen to set up and head the Service".⁵

The service took up offices in the State Electricity Commission building at 238 Flinders Street, opposite Flinders Street Station. The offices were open to the public, staffed by Institute members and volunteers, who would offer advice to prospective home-owners on design, building and financing. The SHS sold standard house plans and specifications for the affordable price of £5; all you needed to hand over to a builder and realise your dream home on one of the new subdivisions. The designs were submitted by about forty members of the Institute of Architects, contributing to an ever-expanding selection of homes to choose from.



PEER REVIEWED ESSAY

Opposite "Small Homes Section: A house divided" *The Age* July 2, 1947, 5

Continued

Opposite
Royal Victorian Institute
of Architects and the
Small Homes Service,
The Age, '20 plans brick
vener: Selected from
the full range of 300
modern designs, Small
Homes Service', Small
Homes Service, no. 18,
Melbourne: The Service,
(1959) courtesy State
Library of Victoria Rare
Books Collection

What set the SHS apart from its precedents, and a key factor in determining its success, was its connection to the media. "The scheme was one important step ahead of all previous experiments", Boyd wrote, "it had the co-operation of a daily newspaper, *The Age*. Every week, in a feature article, this service could remind the public of its existence and could advertise some new plan."⁶ In a weekly column, under the heading "Small Homes Section", Boyd would write in an accessible and lively tone for a public audience, advocating for modern design, and presenting one of the many house plans sold by the service. "Boyd's ability, not only to design but to publicise design," wrote Clerehan, "was the main reason for the Small Homes Service's initial and continuing success".⁷

Beginnings

The hallmarks of Boyd's approach are present in the very first "Small Homes Section", on page 4 of *The Age* on Wednesday 2 July 1947.⁸ It is worth spending some time examining it in detail. Boyd's column leads with the biblical title "A House Divided", a division which refers to a house plan comprising two blocks — one for living, one for sleeping — linked by a glazed hall. Boyd unpacks the design of the house from various perspectives: lifestyle and social dynamics, material constraints, modern planning principles, cost, taste and the potential for expansion. Under the sub-heading "Zoned" Planning", Boyd describes a presumably typical 1940s domestic scene, and how the two distinct blocks of the house can cater to it. "The young son, who is entertaining his rather noisy school friend in his bedroom, does not interrupt his father's enjoyment of the parliamentary broadcast. Conversely, on the following night, father, who has retired early after a heavy day, is sufficiently remote from the living room to be spared the sound of the son's piano practice." Here, Boyd explains the concept of zoning — presumably unfamiliar to the general reader of *The Age* — with a relatable vignette. This tiny drama of domestic negotiation, with the stereotyped characters of "overworked dad" and "boisterous son", plays out on the stage of this new home, which discretely resolves any potential conflict.

Under the sub-heading "Saves Work", Boyd writes, "The segregation [of the house] is of value to every member of the family, but it favours no one more than the housewife." (Predictably for this time, the assumed gender roles go unquestioned.) "Every morning, for instance, the livingroom may be cleaned and made ready free of the imminent danger that the children, who are making mud pies in the garden, may race through it on the way to the bathroom for more ingredients." Despite sounding off-key today, again, Boyd's use of a family vignette to convey architectural concepts of space planning, manages to avoid jargon and connect with his intended audience of lay readers. In this way, ideas that would otherwise be confined to the pages of specialist magazines found their way onto the kitchen tables of a broad public across Victoria. The design of the house is presented in a street perspective, floor plan, site plan and interior sketch. A stiff breeze bends the trees in the perspective, suggesting the open space of the suburbs. The plan is drawn upside-down to an architect's eye, with north

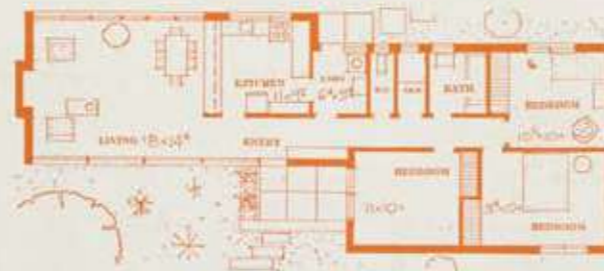
down the page, allowing the front door to lead up the page. Fixtures, furniture, floor surfaces and landscaping are all shown, giving a scale and sense of life, as if you could walk in the front door and sit down by the fireplace. Boyd had a natural sense for communication through word and image, taking technical drawings and reframing them in an accessible manner. "The presentation of the drawings was in itself a design triumph", wrote Clerehan, "each element, plan, elevation and section was identified by a smart typeface in an arrangement clearly legible to the lay-person".⁹

The 'small' in Small Homes Service was central to the proposition, as wartime material restrictions remained in place. "This house is just twelve squares including all porches", writes Boyd, "This is the maximum for timber allowed without a permit under the State building restrictions, but it is not a large area." The plan of the house anticipates the lifting of these constraints, which would finally happen in 1952, by dotting in a further bedroom wing and second living room, "to add as the stork commands and the banker permits". In addition to the "divided" blocks of living and sleeping, the plan shows a toilet and shower room separated from the bathroom — the only one for a family of three or four — improving flexibility. These potential inconveniences are never presented as such, with Boyd in salesman mode, taking these constraints and spinning them as something positive.

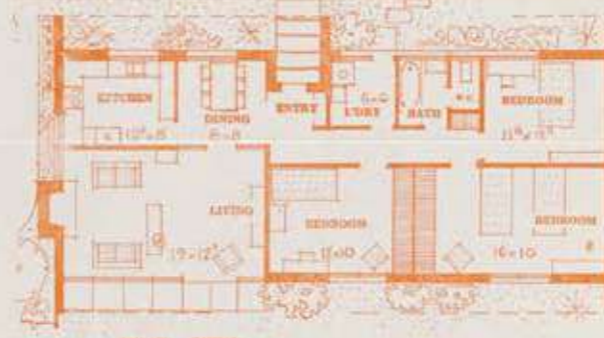
This optimism appears to be a core part of the project. For the best part of twenty years leading up to 1947, Australia had been either in economic depression or fighting a world war. The clean, light, bright and open homes Boyd promotes through the SHS represent a throwing off of the old world and the embrace of the new. "A lot of households had at least one returned man or woman in their number, and people had been within an inch of losing their lives, so I think in those early post-war years they were much more willing to experiment", wrote Conrad Hamann.¹⁰ Those returned from service could afford to question the inherited assumptions of home design, and, for a brief period, would aspire to something different from their parents.

In further articles Boyd would range over topics from cooperative building to roof pitches, architect's fees to solar orientation, interior design to kitchen layout, cupboard storage to colour schemes. Occasionally he would take up the role of 'agony aunt', fielding readers' questions, such as on 29 October 1947, where he offers "4 steps to a home for an immigrant", advising on where to obtain permits and financing. To capture attention, he would spin sensational headlines, asking "Who would live in a modern house?" (9 February 1949) or "The most criticised house of the year". These subjects acted as the hook for Boyd to then promote his "House of the Week", the latest design available through the SHS.

One of the most striking aspects reading the Small Homes Section is Boyd's relaxed and confident tone. Boyd was only 28 when he took up directorship of the Service and had only registered as an architect earlier that same year. He had very little experience of the small home, having built only one, and in the process of building his own in Camberwell.



V327 A long, low ranch house which can either fit on a very wide (80') block or down a narrow (minimum 25') block. This house has been successfully built in Melbourne. It has a large livingroom and at least a wing wall should divide kitchen and laundry. The third bedroom could serve as a study. The low-pitched roof in asbestos cement, aluminium or tile could be extended down to form a car port as part of the design of the house. 111 squares. Current estimate £3350.



V329 On a narrow block facing east, this house would get the northern sun into the livingroom and two bedrooms. If used on a wide block, north should be at the rear. The bedrooms are generous and the dining arrangement is unusual. The house is roofed with one simple gable, probably low-pitched. 111 squares, current estimate £3300.



V333 A modern roof treatment brings this well-known and popular plan up to date. A small terrace is enclosed by archway of the front roof and similarly a small open terrace is formed by two rear projections either side of the kitchen. Two-way access is provided to the w.c. The house is 122 squares and is suitable for a 50' block. Current estimate £3320.



V334 This 51-roomed house provides accommodation generally required by a majority of home builders. Bedrooms are ample, plumbing areas are well grouped for economy, w.c. compartment, bath and the laundry could be used for cubic closet installation. Eating space is provided in the kitchen and a combined living-diningroom is also included. 12 squares. It will fit on a 50' block. Current estimate £3250.



V337 This house is a contemporary version of V324. Its shallow roof would be ideal for one of the new patented steel roofs which are fixed by the manufacturer and therefore very suitable to be used by owner-builders. This plan contains the most popular bathroom arrangement. The shower recess is separate from the bath and the w.c. is off but has an additional external doorway. The bath is set in a bench top. Just over 12 squares it will fit on 50' block or across 55'. With the alternative placing a different position for the front entrance should be considered. Current estimate £3400.



V338 A triple-fronted three-bedroom house, although old-fashioned, this particular version has a modern feature of a front view from the kitchen. Suitable for a 55' block, it is 13 squares in area. Current estimate £3300.

Continued

Opposite
“Small Homes Section:
A house divided”
The Age July 2, 1947, 5.
[detail]

This home would serve as a prototype for those Boyd would promote through the SHS: modest in size, lightweight in construction, open plan, light, bright, and modern. It was also where Boyd first developed the ‘window wall’ with which his designs and those of the SHS would become closely associated. “It was with the Windowwall that Boyd, more than any other single architect, gave our suburbs a distinctive look.” Wrote Clerehan, “Even Palladio couldn’t do that”.¹¹

A box toward the end of the first Small Homes Section, announcing Boyd’s directorship, describes him as “one of Melbourne’s best-known young architects”. This may not have been true, more likely a case of a newspaper boosting the credentials of its latest appointment. Either way, the Small Homes Service and particularly, the Small Homes Section in *The Age*, would quickly turn Robin Boyd into a household name.

Reception

By positioning itself to address the housing crisis, the SHS would prove to be hugely popular. In Boyd’s second column, he announces the figures for the first week, writing, “The Small Homes Service has been open for nine days. During this time nearly one thousand people have visited”.¹² An astonishing number, off the back of a modest front-page announcement and half of page 4 the following day. The SHS had revealed a latent demand for architects to be useful, by offering their services to a broad public, particularly at this time of great need. Architects, then as now, were largely absent from the single-family house in the suburbs. The thin margins couldn’t support architects’ fees, and the “lowbrowism”¹³ of the Australian male would prefer to fit in than stand out. The SHS managed to square this circle, offering a better product for the same price to the consumer. Standard plans meant you didn’t stand out.

What of the architects? The designers of plans sold through the SHS were offered royalties for each house built. £5 plan sets could be sold up to 40 times, with royalties capped at £75, a similar fee to what they might expect for a bespoke design. Not all were in support however. “An institute of architects selling blue-prints was no more reasonable than a medical association offering forceps for sale for home surgery”, wrote Boyd, echoing a common complaint that the service would de-value the architect’s expertise and skill.¹⁴ But rather than undercutting the market for an architect’s full service, the SHS opened another one, of those for whom architecture was out of reach. In one of the most memorable passages in *Australia’s Home*, Boyd advocates for these “sensitive people” who otherwise couldn’t afford to commission an architect:

These were people who could not afford original paintings but were able to buy reproductions, who could not afford front seats at a concert but queued up for the gallery, who were able to enjoy personal appreciation of literature, drama, film and every other art but architecture, within their modest means. Supporters of the stock-plan bureaux asked the critics to explain how architecture could ever progress if it was to remain available only to the well-to-do.¹⁵

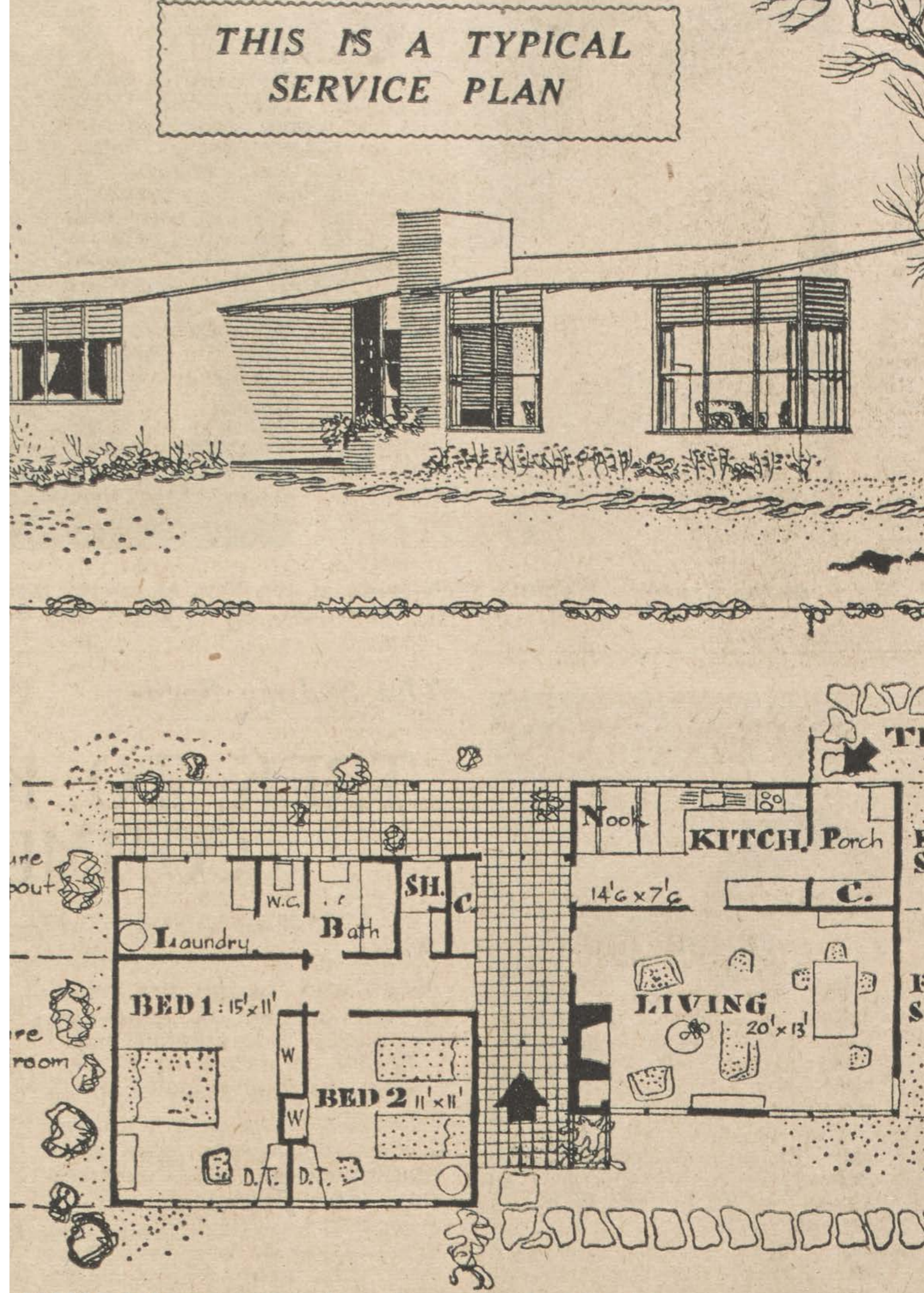
Here we get a glimpse of Boyd’s larger mission behind the SHS: the democratisation of good design through an institution of public purpose. He hoped that the service would open up the profession beyond its elite clientele and be a way to connect it with the public at large. The service would build 5,000 homes in its first five years under Boyd’s directorship, an estimated 15% of homes built in Victoria at the time, introducing a generation of families to modern architecture.¹ It is this impact on a large scale that is one of the most important lessons to be drawn from the SHS. No other architectural project in Victoria has managed to make such a substantial contribution since.

This passage also reveals a broader cultural ambition for the Small Homes Service. By placing modern homes within reach, Boyd hoped to elevate architecture to the level of the other arts — literature, painting, drama, film — and create a broader literacy and appreciation of it. Out of this, he hoped an authentic Australian architecture could grow. Boyd had been frustrated by the misplaced nationalism of previous generations of Australian architects, who would look back across the sea for inspiration, rather than at the ground on which they stood. “As late as 1939 many conservative designers lived in daily hope of a swing of the pendulum that would touch again the romantic lines of mediaeval England. ‘It must return’, they used to say, ‘it’s in the blood of our people’”.¹⁷ These transplanted styles bore little consideration for the local climate or way of life. “The heat of Western Australia and the cold of Tasmania, the timber of Queensland and the stone of South Australia, all produced Renaissance, Queen Anne or Spanish Mission more or less simultaneously”, Boyd wrote. For a way forward, he looked instead to the “natural shelters thrown together in haste by men without a care for appearances”.¹⁸ In these shacks and sheds, crudely made of timber, bark and tin, Boyd found the seeds for this new authentic style, suited to the local climate and way of life.

The open simplicity of the Small Homes Service designs, their concern for solar orientation, and their sympathy with nature, would set the stage for this transformative movement in Australian architecture and design, reaching its pinnacle in the 1960s. This was a political project as much as it was an aesthetic one. First, to create new eyes to see Australia for what it is, and second, to use this newfound appreciation to overturn the misplaced nationalism for the mother country. The modern home was deployed as a tool of nation building.

Hesitation

As early as 1952, Boyd reveals some frustration at Australia’s blind commitment to the single-family house as the pinnacle achievement of adult life. “Whenever an Australian boy spoke to an Australian girl of marriage, he meant, and she understood him to mean, a life in a five-roomed home”.¹⁹ The private villa, which promises liberation at the scale of the family, becomes a prison of conformity at the scale of the city. The stifling monotony of the suburbs stretching to the horizon, coupled with the unquestioning presumption that’s where you would end up, leads, in Boyd’s mind, to a shallow culture of individualists. “In a land of the free, the houses of the free were narrow, straight-laced, smug”. Boyd stepped



Continued

down as director of the Small Homes Service in 1953, to form a private practice with Roy Grounds and Frederick Romberg, handing over to his deputy, Neil Clerehan. With wartime material restrictions lifted, and Melbourne having overcome the worst of the housing crisis, the SHS lost its critical public function.

The Small Homes Service had affirmed the suburbs as a territory worthy of architectural attention. And yet, the stubborn resistance to change shown by the suburban inhabitants would leave Boyd practically despondent at what has become of the suburbs, of Australia, and Australians. Writing in 1970, he argues “The Australian suburb has been consistent in its ignorance and emotional immaturity for nearly a century. Will it never alter, as some pessimists suggest, until radical changes in Australian values and education bring to maturity, in a distant future, an entirely new kind of Australian citizen with different orientations and intellectual motivations? Or is it just that the Australian public clings to its depressing little boxes because it knows no better, has seen no better design?”²⁰ The Small Homes Service would change the look of the suburban home, but it couldn’t change the people who lived in it.

Alternatives

Boyd’s death in 1971, at the age of only 52, means we can only speculate on where his ideas may have led. Already in Australia’s Home, he tentatively looks to co-operative building as a potential future for the suburbs, holding up an experiment in the new suburb of Lalor, where 1,200 ex-servicemen banded together to collectively build a garden suburb with “offices, theatres, and shops, co-operatively owned and controlled”. However, the failure of this venture leaves Boyd disheartened, concluding “The Australian home-owner remained essentially an uncooperative individualist”.²¹

Despite having done so much to popularise it, Boyd sought liberation from the stifling smugness of suburbia. “Family life had become, for the female, an endless sequence of cooking and restorative work behind the activities of the male and the infant. For the male, it was a fruitless search for quietness and peace in a jungle of kitchen and cleaning equipment and dissatisfied children. For the children, it was a constant conflict against restrictions”.²² He hoped that the wave of European migrants might bring an appreciation of different modes of living with them, “They remembered the best aspects of the apartment blocks of their home towns: a high room, a view of a park, the purr of the city beyond the trees luring them to the gay life only a minute away”.²³ Boyd glimpses this reality in a number of projects he endorses in the 1972 book *Living and Partly Living*, edited by Ian McKay.²⁴ Boyd’s chapter looks specifically at the design of the neighbourhood, as opposed to the individual house, holding up recently-completed medium-density blocks which promote collective living as a counter to the freestanding individualism of suburbia. The co-operative housing block of 180 flats for staff and students of the University of Melbourne, designed by Earle, Shaw & Partners on Cross Street in Carlton, completed in 1971, features blocks between two and four storeys, with a ten storey tower for students. The blocks are unified with

“romantically random roofs”, native planting throughout, pedestrian paths and public spaces, and cars relegated to the basement.

Boyd also nods toward City Edge in South Melbourne, the medium-density estate designed by Daryl Jackson and Evan Walker, and developed by Merchant Builders, which was then under construction. Like the Cross Street project, City Edge is composed of a mixture of different scales and apartment types, from 3 bedroom terraces to studio flats in higher-rise sections set back from the street. A shared park, shops, and a kindergarten further encourage collective living. But City Edge and Cross Street are not suburban. South Melbourne and Carlton are decidedly inner-city, and the buildings are decidedly dense. If Boyd’s answer to suburbia was to return to the city and live in an apartment, then it would be left to Boyd’s successors to carry forward the ideas seeded by the Small Homes Service.

Successors

The most compelling of these successors to the SHS was Merchant Builders, established by David Yencken, Graeme Gunn and John Ridge in 1965. Like the SHS, Merchant Builders offered standard plans for suburban lots, to which they added a construction and landscape service. Gunn was most closely associated as designer of the homes, but plans were also made by Charles Duncan, Jackson & Walker, McGlashan & Everist, and native landscaping by Ellis Stones. Yencken, who sadly died a few days ago at the time of writing, had a close association with Boyd, having commissioned him to design the Black Dolphin Motel in Merimbula in 1960. Merchant Builders sought to overcome the individualism of the suburbs that so frustrated Boyd. They would champion “cluster housing”, such as at Winter Park in Doncaster, completed in 1970, a development of 20 houses set within a landscape of private and semi-private space. A shared parkland, set back from the busy road, offered a place for children to play and neighbours to meet. Like the SHS, they operated in the free market, attracting potential buyers by offering a better product than the mass housebuilders of the day. Without a weekly newspaper column to promote their offer, Merchant Builders became deft marketers, using innuendo to cut through the noise. “Quite a knob, Mr. Yencken” read an ad promoting the company’s architectural hardware, and “Quite a beam, Mr. Ridge” for their attention to structure.²⁵ In their 26 years of operation Merchant Builders would build many thousands of homes, having an inordinate impact on the design of Melbourne’s suburbs. All of this was driven by an open optimism for life in the suburbs, in sharp contrast to Boyd’s ultimate characterisation of suburbia as a place of stifling snobbery. Yencken would write in 1970 that, “The great mass has shown itself to be remarkably receptive to new and better ideas when those ideas appear in the right place, at the right price, at the right time”.²⁶

The Small Homes Service, and its successors, would seek to guide the direction of the suburbs toward quality, clarity, communality, and openness. It was hoped these values would then rub off on those who lived there, to instill an enlightened culture where it was felt to be lacking. But these ambitions were overwhelmed by the scale of the suburbs, which grew



Top
Suburban subdivisions
extending into farmland
beyond Sunbury, 2017.
Image: Rory Hyde

Bottom
Sketch of what a ‘Small
Homes Adaptability
Service’ might look like,
2017. Image: Rory Hyde

Continued



Top
Father and son cleaning
a motorbike in the drive
of one of the new houses
beyond Sunbury, 2017.
Image: Rory Hyde

and grew unabated, the pale-yellow stud frames marching over the horizon to the ceaseless clip of the nail gun.

What would Boyd do?

Today it is rare to come across a home built from Small Homes Service plans.²⁷ The suburbs which were once impossibly distant from the GPO, beyond the reach of the sewers or electricity, are now considered convenient, rising in value. As families expanded and aspired for more, the homes were unsentimentally knocked down and replaced. Their modest size and simple construction did not endear them to the preservationists. The present 'mid-century modern' revival came too late for most. These were homes for a simpler time, built almost like holiday houses for young families to camp out in, to enjoy the optimistic sunshine after the end of the war.

When Boyd assumed his role as director of the Small Homes Service in 1947, the population of Melbourne stood at 1.2 million. Today, only 70 years on, the city is now home to more than 4 million people. Overwhelmingly, these new Melbournians make their home on the city's fringes, with an estimated 83% of this population growth accommodated in low-density auto-dependent exurbs and car-dependent suburbs.²⁸ Once again we face a housing crisis, defined by a lack of affordability and a lack of availability, compounded by long commutes to work and an increasing diffusion of essential services such as schools, hospitals and parks. With the city projected to expand to 8 million people by 2051, this crisis is unlikely to be resolved anytime soon.

What might we learn from the Small Homes Service in addressing this crisis today? Could such a programme be revived? What form might it take? And if he were here now, what would Boyd do?

Projects such as Nightingale Housing, conceived by Jeremy McLeod of Breathe Architects, are realising Boyd's turn toward medium-density housing near the end of his life. Various pre-fabricated kit home companies aimed at the suburban market, such as Prebuilt, Modscape or Archiblox, are applying new technologies to offer a superior product for an affordable price. Elsewhere, I have proposed a Small Homes *Adaptability* Service, directed to retrofitting the existing housing stock to suit the needs of today, transforming the suburbs to become socially, environmentally, and economically supportive places.²⁹ Shane Murray and others at Monash University have been developing proposals for densifying the suburbs for many years. Alan Pert at the University of Melbourne and others are looking to revive a housing 'expo', to promote new ideas and ways of living to the public at large.

But much of this work takes on a technocratic tone, argued through frightening statistics of commute times, housing costs, ageing populations and resource depletion. Alternatives are held up as necessary, rather than desirable: "This is what the city needs, and so this is what the people shall get". Ultimately Boyd saw the Small Homes Service not merely as a housing project but as a cultural project. Bound together with a national story, the Small Homes Service deployed the aesthetics of modernism to promote the ethics of modernity. An ambition which was undermined by the inherent individualism of life in a freestanding house fortified by a picket fence. If the future of housing is to turn away from the suburbs in favour of the collective life, we don't need new designs, we need new stories.

Endnotes

- 1 "Architectural Service for Your New Home", *The Age* (1 July 1947), 1.
- 2 Geoffrey Serle, *Robin Boyd: A Life* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1992), 72.
- 3 Robin Boyd, *Australia's Home* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1952), 274.
- 4 Boyd, *Australia's Home*, 275.
- 5 Neil Clerehan, "The Age RVIA Small Homes Service", *Transition* 38, (1992): 57.
- 6 Boyd, *Australia's Home*, 275.
- 7 Clerehan, "The Age", 58.
- 8 Robin Boyd, "Small Homes Section: A House Divided", *The Age* (2 July 1947), 4.
- 9 Clerehan, "The Age", 59.
- 10 Conrad Hamann, "The architect as public intellectual", Rory Hyde ed *Future Practice. Conversations from the Edge of Architecture* (New York & London: Routledge 2012), 211.
- 11 Clerehan, "The Age", 60.
- 12 Robin Boyd, "Small Homes Section: The first step to a home", *The Age* (16 July 1947), 5.
- 13 Sidney J. Baker, *The Australian Language* (Currawong Publishing 1945), quoted by Boyd in *Australia's Home*, 283.
- 14 Boyd, *Australia's Home*, 276.
- 15 Boyd, *Australia's Home*, 276.
- 16 Serle, *Robin Boyd*, 92.
- 17 Boyd, *Australia's Home*, 237.
- 18 Boyd, *Australia's Home*, 232.
- 19 Boyd, *Australia's Home*, 281.
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- 21 Boyd, *Australia's Home*, 280.
- 22 Boyd, *Australia's Home*, 282.
- 23 Boyd, *Australia's Home*, 284.
- 24 Robin Boyd, "The Neighbourhood", in Ian McKay ed, *Living and Partly Living: Housing in Australia* (Melbourne: Thomas Nelson Publishing, 1972).
- 25 Anne Gartner, "Merchant Builders: From Reform to Receivership" unpublished PhD thesis, Monash University (February 1994).
- 26 David Yencken, "Failure", *Architect* (July-August 1970): 20. I am grateful to Alan Pert for drawing my attention to this article.
- 27 Monash University is conducting a search for homes built as part of the SHS, and for people who may remember living in them. "Small Homes Service: Do you have a story?", September 25, 2018, <https://www.monash.edu/mada/news/articles/2018/small-homes-service>
- 28 David Gordon, "Is Australia a Suburban Nation?", *Alexandrine Press*, (June 30 2016), <http://www.alexandrinepress.co.uk/blogged-environment/australia-suburban-nation>
- 29 Rory Hyde, "What Would Boyd Do? A Small Homes Service for Today", *Architecture Australia* (May/June 2018): 71

Small Homes Section



The People Choose a House

First Favorite at the Small Homes Service

This is the most popular house to date in the Small Homes Service library. Of all the dozens of plans offering, this has raised the most inquiries. More people have bought the drawings and specifications for it.

WHEN WORK STARTS soon on building to this plan for the various owners, all scattered points around Melbourne, houses of some variety will begin to take form. For the different owners have decided on different finishes.

The timber frame is constant, but the external lining will vary from weatherboard to asbestos-cement and wood-cement sheets. To suit an east aspect, one owner has had the plan reversed.

But in each case the basic room

arrangement has remained unaltered. It was the plan that first attracted the owners. It is, apparently, a plan that perfectly suits their families.

It is difficult to say where the popularity of this house is engendered.

There are many houses of a similar character in the Small Homes Service library. There are many plans with an equally efficient, convenient and economical arrangement of space.

There are some more imaginative and unusual houses, and several more spectacular.

all the most used equipment.

Beyond this working section there is space for a "nook" for family meals. When guests or other circumstances require a more formal meal, the living room may be used. Service is just as handy through the door in the dividing wall.

The communication between all rooms is through a large central hall space. This area has been subdivided by a cupboard fitting, facing the rear. In front of it is the entrance section, opening to the living room and the main bedroom. The doors to the service rooms, bath, laundry and kitchen, are screened from view by the cupboards.

Apart from the front door there are three subsidiary escapes from the house. At the far (dining) end of the living room there is a set of double French windows opening to the rear private garden, for the benefit of those who like their spring meals in the sun. The laundry, projecting under an extension of the roof on the service side, possesses its own door and porch. The kitchen has another door, also opening to the back garden.

Built-in Cupboards

The drawings for this house have details for a great quantity of built-in furniture. Apart from the working section of the kitchen, there is an almost continuous line of cupboards backing the central wall which divides the living and service section. Visitors' coats, linen, brooms, the sewing machine and many other less beautiful but essential items have their special place here.

Beside the livingroom fireplace there is a fuel cupboard that can be filled from the outside and emptied from the inside.

The house will fit satisfactorily on a block of almost any size. On land as narrow as forty feet it will allow a drive on one side.

In the plan shown here the extreme lines indicate the boundaries of a 30-foot wide block. If 10 feet is left for the drive past the laundry 14 feet remains between the bedroom and the opposite fence.

On a wider block, to suit a different orientation, the plan may be swung at right angles to the boundaries. The entrance porch and main rooms would thus face the street. The total length being 43 feet, there is plenty of room for a side drive on a 60-foot wide block.

Approximate Cost

The probable cost of erection in weatherboard in Melbourne suburbs (to-day) is estimated at £1500. As with all estimates given by the Small Homes Service, this figure is based on costs supplied by reputable builders engaged on house construction around the city, members of the Master Builders' Association.

There are several features to the plan which make for economy.

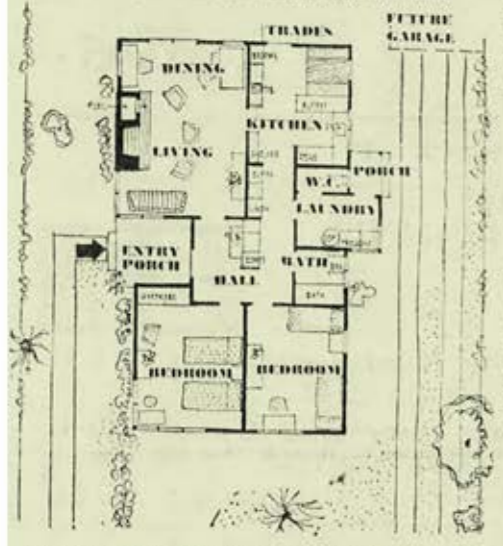
Except for two small breaks, it is contained in the one rectangle, the simplest form to construct. The roof runs in one clean gable.

The grouping of the service rooms has enabled the plumbing fittings to be contained in a short run of 18 feet.

This house, selected for its suitable ground plan and allowed to grow into a suitable, unpretentious house, will give long pleasure to its owners. It will always be light and fresh.

Its appeal will not fade. It is not doomed, as are all houses which seek to be fashionable by the application of some "modern" decoration, to be obsolete in design by 1952. And although it takes most people about a quarter of a century to pay for a house, the difference between modern and old fashioned in decoration is only about five years.

Working drawings, specifications and detail drawings of this house are available immediately through the Small Homes Service at 238 Flinders-street (opposite Flinders-street Station).



The plan of House Number T.24 in the Small Homes Service library of basic plans: Great convenience in a little volume.

Model Kitchen

The kitchen here is very similar to the model room that was illustrated and described on this page a fortnight ago. The working section is confined to a compact U. The housewife, standing in front of a big window, has grouped about her in easy reach



The living room of house Number T.24 is 19 feet by 13 feet 6 inches. This is the view from the entrance hall door. The wide French windows in the far wall open to the rear private garden. The door on the right leads to the kitchen. Interest is added by the drop in the ceiling above the fireplace wall. This is a thoroughly logical device, which has dispensed with the need to raise the rafter line over this wider section of the house. A simpler, cheaper roof has resulted.

Grand Plans: Robin Boyd and the Small Homes Service

Virginia Mannering



PEER
REVIEWED
ESSAY

Through a series of research projects and a subsequent exhibition held in May 2019, students at Monash University's Department of Architecture investigated the relationship between the built and discursive outputs of the Small Homes Service under the stewardship of Robin Boyd and others. The exhibition reasserted the often fragile, incomplete and transient nature of the scheme and its homes, and their outsized contribution to a larger architectural discussion and to the lives of their occupants. Rather than focussing on the dwellings as architectural archetypes, students were interested in communicating the Service's impacts, operations and transformations, especially as charted in Robin Boyd's articles and polemic writings.

In mid-winter 1946 a prototype house was erected and exhibited in Melbourne's Treasury Gardens.¹ Compact, modern and quick to construct, the Beaufort House was intended to address pressing material shortages and an overall deficit of housing in post-war Australia. The experimental house had support from a set of active young architects and powerful national bodies. Officials from the Ministry for Housing, the Department of Aircraft Production and the Victorian Housing Commission opened the exhibition to great fanfare.² Over the course of a few short weeks, thousands of eager potential buyers passed through the house, with media reportage remarking on its pleasing features and modern comforts targeted at, and approved by, key demographics such as young couples and families.³ But the excitement was short-lived; within two years the project's organising body had scattered and the programme shuttered, having delivered just seventy-odd dwellings.

That tale is not the story of the Small Homes Service, which was founded around the same time, but of a scheme far more complex, and ultimately far less resilient. The Beaufort House was one of a set of mass-produced housing solutions designed to expediently address the huge shortfall in access to, and delivery of housing in the wake of World War II.⁴

The collapse of the Beaufort scheme is important here because it sets up the context from which the Small Homes Service – a collaboration between *The Age* newspaper and Royal Victorian Institute of Architects – emerged and ultimately unsettled. It is a context that is difficult to communicate because, paradoxically, the Small Homes Service has been recorded as a success. This article examines some of those achievements as part of a larger media project that sat somewhere between editorial, performance, political activism and architectural bureau. It outlines an exhibition produced and designed by Monash Architecture students on the Small Homes Service and on

the many voices that reflected the diversity of experience across the lifespan of the service.

The Beaufort House was an ambitious project that emerged with the aim of ameliorating the immediate post-war housing crisis and easing any disquiet and hopefully "...break[ing] the back' of Victoria's housing shortage".⁵ Accounts of the prototype's Treasury Gardens exhibition suggest it was successful in garnering public interest; 86,000 people visited the house in the exhibition's first fortnight of operation. But the Beaufort House also represented a conflicted nexus of activity and illustrated the way a technocratic, top-down response was not the right solution at that time. Though reports note that visitors enjoyed the Beaufort House's practical layout and finishes, producing a crowd-pleasing design was just one of a set of obstacles to be overcome.⁶ The scheme was a joint initiative of state and federal governments and used the redeployment of the wartime aviation knowledges, technology and infrastructure to produce steel-framed prefabricated dwellings. It was clever but also risky and, potentially, politically dangerous.

Houses have symbolic resonance and the Beaufort House could not easily be distanced from the images and structure of bureaucratic delivery.⁷ Likewise, houses can be connected to economic and political forces and when the impetus behind these moves is damaged or removed, so too is the design. While excitement greeted the exhibition of the Beaufort House, it also became a lightning rod for political point-scoring and public dissent. Homeless soldiers tried to claim it; threatening to sleep in it as a form of protest, in an attempt to voice dissatisfaction with the glacial process of housing provision.⁸

Despite evident public interest, subsequent steel shortages, strikes and political shifts meant the Beaufort scheme was destined to fail within two years of its public unveiling. In the intervening period, Robin Boyd had become director/editor of a multi-pronged, evidently more easily implemented and less controversial housing scheme, the

Opposite
Small Homes Section
"The People Choose a House", *The Age*, July 23, 1947. 5. Courtesy of the State Library of Victoria. Article features the popular T24 house plan

Continued

Top

Royal Victorian Institute of Architects and *The Age*, 'Small homes / service of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects in conjunction with the Age'. (Melbourne: Small Homes Service (1950), courtesy State Library of Victoria Rare Books Collection. [cover]

Opposite

Royal Victorian Institute of Architects and *The Age*, (1950), 'Small homes / service of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects in conjunction with the Age'. (Melbourne: Small Homes Service (1950), 6-7, courtesy State Library of Victoria Rare Books Collection. [interior page]

Small Homes Service. Accompanying the Service was the “Small Homes Section”, the associated weekly column in *The Age* newspaper.

The Beaufort's demise was a source of real concern for Boyd, whose columns provided post-mortems on the topic on more than one occasion. A year after its closure, a still-frustrated Boyd authored an article entitled “14 Invisible Houses a Day: A lament on an anniversary”.⁹ In his eulogy for the project, Boyd noted that “This time last year Australia's first and only large-scale attack on the housing shortage was collapsing in confusion”. Continuing in a stinging critique, he blamed this on a fear of new technologies and shifts in the structure of the building industry that the Beaufort scheme would have triggered, writing:

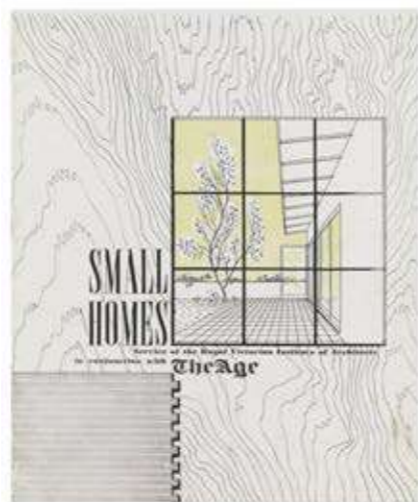
We cancelled it because, when it came to the point, we were frightened by the prospects. We preferred the brick and trowel, the hammer and nail — the tried, slow, comfortable methods. Somebody was frightened by the thought of such a tremendous change in the status quo of the building industry- workers leaving the sites to gather beneath the roof of a central factory, assembly-line production in place of the wheelbarrow and spade.¹⁰

Boyd was saddened by the failure of a complex and radical technical solution, but the fact remains that the Small Homes Service operated with a far larger ambit – a cultural-social production that was geared towards fostering a young, ambitious audience excited by the possibilities, agency and potentials that an open-ended, not-quite complete and discourse-driven proposition provided.

It is interesting to compare the two housing solutions. Where the Beaufort House relied on convincing an ultimately conservative bureaucratic muscle of its viability, the Small Homes Service seemed nimbler in its approach to the housing shortage, focussing on transferring agency and knowledge to the prospective homeowner, rather than the Beaufort's integrated and object-driven solution. Ongoing discussions at the time had revolved around material shortages, labour politics and a distrust of socialism and the Small Homes Service had to position itself around these contested topics, seemingly avoiding the larger, heated and dangerous discourse that had affected the Department of Aircraft Production's experiment.¹¹

The Small Homes Service and Section (SHS)

Melbourne's *The Age* newspaper published its first Small Homes Section column in July 1947. Two small notices also appeared on that page, one reminds readers that from the following Monday, the Small Homes Service bureau will be open on the ground floor of 237 Flinders Street. The other is titled “Architect's Pledge to Home-Builders” and contains a statement from W. Race Godfrey, then president of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects. In it, Godfrey briefly thanks *The Age* for its support in setting up the Small Homes Section, and then concludes by reassuring readers of his members' keenness to help the home builder and “improve the standard of housing” in Victoria. The statement is polite and matter of fact. Although the service and its associated column seemed to have been a long time



coming, this first column is - unlike the Beaufort prototype's opening - noticeably lacking in introductory fanfare.¹²

As the Section's inaugural editor, Boyd seems to launch into his first column mid-flight. He never really introduces himself (a small box at the bottom of the page makes brief mention of Boyd's editorship), nor does he welcome his readers, or provide his overarching vision for the service. Instead his opening paragraph immediately begins to describe the features of a house plan coded the T22 and its meritorious “zoned planning”.¹³ Like most of his SHS columns, Boyd uses the plan as a device to discuss wider issues while taking his reader on a virtual tour of the home. In this instance he points out T22's modern character and expandability. A curious relationship with family dynamics is evident as he constructs a scene of domestic suburban life, and maybe even reveals what it meant to be a middle-class father at the time; “The young son, who is entertaining his rather noisy school friend in his bedroom, does not interrupt his father's enjoyment of the parliamentary broadcast”. He then shifts focus to the aspects of privacy and housework-relief the T22 can provide, in an appeal that seems targeted at both sides of the domestic partnership.¹⁴

Less than the provision of a prescribed solution, Boyd attempts to build and befriend an audience, to make and sway this constituency with an overarching image and argument. Unlike the Beaufort scheme, the Small Homes Service used marketing, dialogue and the approachability of the bureau and its modifiable designs to catalyse change.¹⁵ The Beaufort scheme sold a steel frame and integrated technologies; the Small Homes Service sold paper plans and specifications, and adaptable ones at that. From the start the Small Homes Service sets up an emphasis on dialogue, its role as a *service*, rather than an object imposed on people. For Boyd, it was as much the published ‘section’ in *The Age*, and a section through a community, as it was the section through the design and the eventual building. Again, this approach is in stark contrast to the Beaufort scheme, with Boyd actively engaging with a readership, many of whom would have been around the same age as Boyd and he responds directly, or even foreshadows their needs.¹⁶ Then aged 27, Boyd ends his first column with a comfortably casual “Well, that's how it goes. Next week a plan with the same accommodation, but an



entirely different room arrangement, will be illustrated” as though he were signing off at the end of a television broadcast.¹⁷ Any sharp critique of the bureaucracy and the public broader than his own specific readership, contrasted with the ease and familiarity he used when communicating with his Age audience.

Producing the Research and Exhibition

Analysing the column's content and Boyd's language was one area of research undertaken by students in classes taught by Charlotte Day (Director of Monash University Museum of Architecture), Professor Naomi Stead (Head of Department of Architecture, Monash University) and Virginia Mannering. Two studies units in Semester 2, 2018 and Semester 1, 2019 were staged to examine the Small Homes Service and then produce an associated exhibition, held as part of a suite of events commemorating the centenary of Boyd's birth. Students studied the Service, the historical and social contexts in which it was founded and its impact. Finally they imagined possibilities for a Small Homes Service of the twenty-first century.

Traditional retrospective architectural exhibitions often focus on the qualities of the architecture, but as students' research progressed, it became clear that the key to the Small Homes Service was not the built artefact, which had myriad realisations and sometimes produced contrasting architectural models. While it may seem obvious, this point posed issues for the exhibition. A clear thread however, was the construction of an educated, formed and enthusiastic audience through the columns, and the production and communication of an awareness of the value of architecture in that newspaper space.

Building on the connective tissues of Boyd's inaugural column, students examined the Service's published output, analysing the early articles through to the “House of the Week” of the 1970s, and the Service's eventual closure amidst a changed domestic housing landscape and marketplace. An analysis and catalogue of each director's tone, language and theme was produced, and students charted corresponding variations in plan type and size. Having been built in suburbs such as Malvern East and Beaumaris as well as regional centres like Geelong, it was common for homes to have been demolished to make way for infrastructure or more substantial dwellings.¹⁸ The

built work of the Small Homes Service is revealed as a partially completed and highly modified record. Undeterred however, students walked those suburbs and mapped remaining and identifiable house clusters.

The class interviewed Small Homes Service home builders, occupants, and their families, as well as one former employee of the Service. The interviews provided critical firsthand knowledge and post-occupancy appraisals of homes, built over a period of approximately thirty years. Early in the production of the exhibition, it became apparent that any chronology and illustration of house types, while useful, would need to be supplemented by first-hand accounts, and evocations of space: through the reproduction of an example house and the consumer interface of the bureau-shopfront. Material of note featured in the exhibition included audio excerpts of the interviews, a three dimensional 1:1 abstraction of a Small Homes Service home, models of the interviewee's homes as finessed, flipped or modified by their builders, and original material (plans, specifications, receipts and photographs).

The number of methods and material techniques employed by the students was aimed at better communicating the linked and interrelated media ecologies that framed the Small Homes Service. The diversity of their research methods and resulting exhibition modes mirrored the multiple approaches and audiences of the service.

The People Choose a House

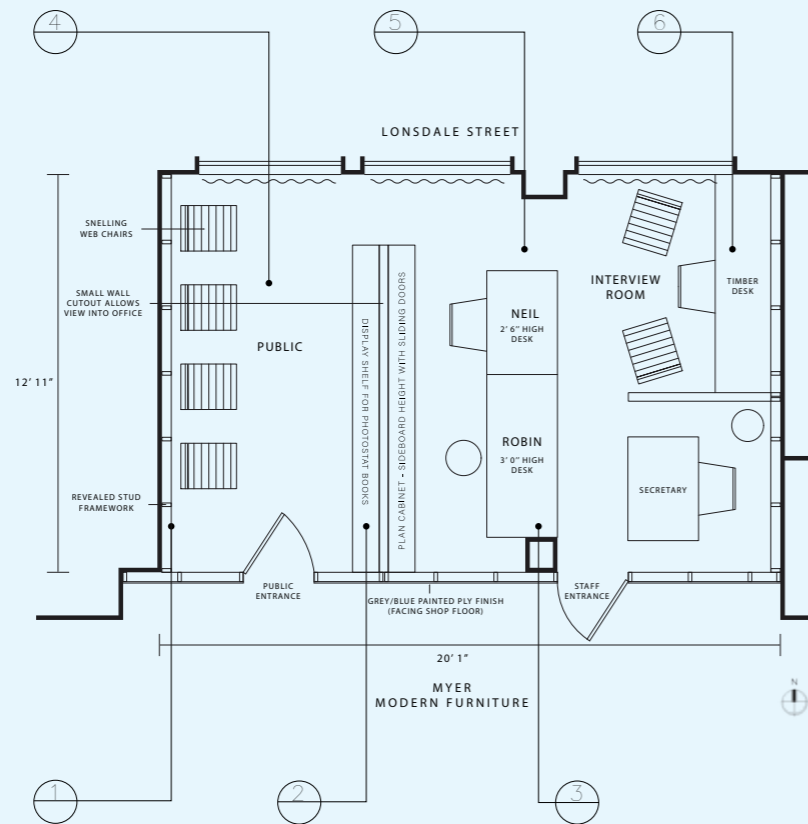
The Small Homes Service had multiple directors across its lifespan but present at every stage of the Service was an interest in generating dialogues with a readership. Audiences were actively encouraged to post questions and responses to columns, and occasionally newly built homes were revisited as proto-post occupancy studies. The relationship with the reader, and their role in this collaborative crisis-solving exercise, is expressed very early on, in a column from 23 July 1947 dedicated to the house plan T24 and named “The People Choose a House”.¹⁹ The title of the article suggests active participation from the column's readers, as if by poll. Boyd later explains that the plan had far outsold any other from the bureau's fortnight-old portfolio, but it's here that the power of the Small Homes Service, initially - and critically - given a voice through Boyd, can be seen.

Continued

If it was a Saturday morning sometimes it could be ten people in there. And all in this little space you know. And we just didn't have masses and masses of books for them to look at.

Neil or Robin would be there to talk to anybody who came in. Well that was why they were there.

This wasn't a very big space and they needed to have this timber desk along, so that they could put out their blueprints



This frame around, this whole frame on the inside, was still you know the timber framing, they hadn't hadn't put any covering on the inside wall. It was very plain. We used to put our coffee cups on them!

Opening up at nine o'clock, making sure that the photostat books were all ready for people to look at ... sometimes they spent their whole lunch time sitting there looking through these books.

I can see Robin, sitting there on the high stool, with his feet on the rails and the board in front of him. He'd have a drafting pen in his left hand and a paintbrush in his mouth and the phone up to his ear. He was talking to somebody and painting something and drawing something as well. It was hysterical.



In pitching the plan to his readers, Boyd attributes the T24's popularity to its efficiency and simplicity. Material rations after World War II meant new homes were limited by government agencies to a constructed footprint of around 100 square metres, but the Small Homes Section often included plans of homes with potential future extensions. In this instance, Boyd notes that the T24 begins life as an "extremely straightforward simple plan and grows up into a most satisfying house". He also cites its lack of a hallway as a reason for attracting patronage. Verification of the latter statement is difficult, and evidence for the popularity of the service, or in particular plans is often attributable only to Boyd, but it seems that in classic marketing terms, the hype-building was a way of reassuring of the quality, sensibility and contemporaneity of the product.

That week's article also highlights the contested landscape that the service sat within. In a period of post-war crisis faced by labour and material rationing, the mood was nevertheless optimistic, focussed on the possibilities of a destabilising and radically shifting social and economic landscape. It was post-war, embedded in crisis, but also there was a sense that this would not last forever. The article sits amongst advertisements for building materials, interior fittings and drafting supplies. Further down the page, a tennis court company promotes its all-weather tout-en-cas surfaces, perhaps foreshadowing the golden-era of Davis Cup greatness and backyard tennis that was soon to come and hinting at an increasingly suburban nation occupied by a growing and aspirational middle class, and at the competing forces operating on Australian housing at the time.

It was also not unusual for house plans to make repeat column appearances and T24 was featured on at least two more occasions during Boyd's directorship. A few weeks after "The People Choose a House" Boyd revisited the plan, telling readers that although the homes had been incredibly popular amongst consumers, conservative councils in several municipalities had "refused permits for low, flat or skillion roofs".²⁰ In this instance the column is used to assert a position, for example between what a favoured and now-knowledgeable public wants, and what an oppositional other, in this case the bureaucracy, will allow.

A key physical component of the "Grand Plans – Robin Boyd and the Small Homes Service" exhibition was the blue framed structure; a 1:1 materialisation of the T24. Students chose to recreate it, rotating and deliberately folding into the gallery space, arguing it exemplified the fundamental properties of the Small Homes Service, the column, and demonstrating the efficiency and careful organisation of the houses themselves. Having completed interviews with Small Homes Services owner-builders, and hearing accounts of the builders' co-operatives in operation at the time, students also recognised the value of engaging in a full-scale reconstruction of a home, in a team and in a very short period.²¹

Positive Incompleteness

Across the exhibition students chose to consistently portray the Small Homes Service projects as "ghost houses", implying the stages of construction or even, as is the case with many Service homes, deconstruction. Much of the accompanying illustrative material also reinforced this. Reasons for reproducing these homes in this manner were multiple but most spoke to the way the Small Homes Service operated at the time and the fragile futures or ephemeral nature of the homes - especially after the passage of six or seven decades. This can be contrasted with the Beaufort Houses, whose few remaining examples exist as noted artefacts of heritage significance possibly because they represent a defined, bounded and therefore protected object.²²

An evocative image depicting the construction of a T320 plan was supplied to the exhibition by the Denheld Family. Taken in the early 1950s, the frame of the homes sits in the middle of a paddock in what would become East Burwood. The tent pitched across planks on the joists of the incomplete house provided the family's interim shelter. The photograph records the grit and tenacity of the Service's home builders but also reinforces the aspects of agency, participation and accessibility evident in the wider project. Students picked up on the tent photograph as another clue for their exhibition design, also seeing it as reason for adopting the half-finished house as a driver for house models and the T24 frame. In contrast to other architectural artefacts, it seems the Small Homes Service home often

Opposite

Top
After interviewing Felicity Williamson, a Small Homes Service employee in the early 1950s, students documented a plan of the Service's bureau. At that time the office was located within Myer's Lonsdale St store. Illustration by Christine Eid and Emily McBain

Left
A blue frame represents the 1:1 materialisation of the T24 house plan in 'Grand Plans - Robin Boyd and the Small Homes Service' exhibition, Monash Art Design and Architecture Faculty Gallery. Photograph by Andrew Curtis

Right
An abstracted version of the Small Homes Service bureau (located in the Myer department store) in 'Grand Plans - Robin Boyd and the Small Homes Service' exhibition, Monash Art Design and Architecture Faculty Gallery. Photograph by Andrew Curtis

This Page

Left
The Denheld Family in their home, constructed using the T320 plan. Courtesy of the Denheld family

Right
The Denheld Family's T320 home under construction in East Burwood. Courtesy the Denheld Family

existed as an object ready to lurch into its next stage – as yet unbuilt - in plan form on page five, then half built, then extended, then renovated or demolished, and gone. The class also elected to connect each house model with the appropriate interview audio, allowing the exhibited home to ‘speak’.

While students were able to re-engineer archetypal plans from the printed examples, the one consistent trait of these dwellings was change and adaptation, often varied from the specification, the newspaper articles, and in subsequent years as occupants shifted and changed. The production of accurate general types appeared somewhat quixotic; instead students focussed on the particular, and on the artefacts relating to the production and discussion of these houses. For students approaching the research from a distance of nearly seventy years, it was clear that the Small Homes Service existed not so much in the homes themselves, but in the column inches and specifications that promulgated them.

Students also asserted this because of their shared understanding of the Small Home Service media landscape as a physical, cultural and critical thing. The exhibition needed to express the structural incompleteness of all components of the larger network; from its organisational structure, to the site office, to half completed houses. Even in a retrospective mode, students were struck by the myriad potentials that were latent in the discussion. This sentiment gradually infiltrated the overall exhibition conception and design.

The class also produced a part-imagined/part-abstracted version of the Small Homes Service’s office. In an interview with Felicity Williamson, an employee of the service from 1951–1953, students asked her to sketch her memory of the office, its layout, materials and atmosphere, and to recollect its process and interactions with patrons.²³ In ‘remaking’ the CBD office of the Small Homes Service, students materialised not only its essence but its role as lynchpin and engine room of *The Age* columns; asserting that there was a loop from Boyd’s editing and selecting of Small Homes Service plans to newspaper column and then back to the office again, where potential home builders could discuss their favourite plan and have it modified according to their particular needs and wishes.²⁴ The office, too, existed as something halfway-incomplete, shifting locations from Flinders St to the Myer department store, but remaining undersized for its oversized production.^{25 26}

The SHS in the 21st Century/Parallel Housing Crises

From the beginning of the project through radio interviews, public discussions and classroom workshops, one consistent line of questioning emerged: that in the midst of the current housing crisis and global uncertainties, focus fell on ways this transformative mid-century collaboration could be appropriated for the 21st century. Often this was couched as ‘what would the SHS look like today?’ Through the research and production of the exhibition the answer to this question began to emerge; that after examining the Service through the exhibition produced by our students, and through the lenses of contemporary media, of agency, and economic, social and political climates, it might be

impossible for the Small Homes Service to exist in a 21st century. Students were in two minds - struck by the pressing need, but also increasingly aware of the structural and contextual differences. Their approach to the exhibition as an interpretative tool for understanding the Small Homes Service hinged on the essential incompleteness of the project. That is, there was no one prescribed solution, nor could it have ever said to be completed.

The Small Homes Service was a long-term project. It relied on a group of people who were willing to commit to the bureau and its columns. Moreover, students remarked on the fundamental differences between fluid and often ad-hoc approaches evident in the Small Homes Service houses, and the modes of design and delivery that operate today. But they also returned to this operational idea of incompleteness - this driver of the exhibition - to suggest an underlying discontinuity. The SHS was conceived at a time of ongoing material shortage, in a contested environment where governments presented radically divergent models of mass housing provision, and the incompleteness of the service - the paradox of contingency and agency - was an implicit strength. But, students argued, without fundamental shifts in how we conceive of housing and its associated markets, such fluid flexibility would, today, be couched as a weakness.

Conclusion

The challenge in exhibiting material from the Small Homes Service fundamentally lay in incompleteness. This was both positive and challenging for students. They were struck by the diversity of narrative and experience engendered by the many homes across the Service’s lifespan. The student curators aimed to reproduce that experience; rather than simply house types: they presented single implementations and the adaptations by occupants framed as partially incomplete or in part. Behind all this was their assertion that the bulk of the Small Homes Service existed as a process, an ongoing dialogue between advocate, reader, builder and occupant. Again, the students presented the Small Homes Service as process manifest through a focus on the column, the office and a sample of homes constructed out of the Service.

The Small Homes Service was distinct from other solutions to the 1940s housing crisis. Boyd’s frustration with the failure of the Beaufort scheme illustrates a contemporary understanding of the fragility of technological, singular and inflexible solutions. At the same time the Small Homes Service was a direct response to a moribund private housing market, and it needed to tread a delicate line between technocratic instruction and the groundswell of popular taste, activity, and intent.

Housing in Australia always takes on an ideological dimension. Robin Boyd recognised this and therefore the Small Homes Service was as much an exercise in the construction of a public as it was in the provision of considered designs. Perhaps, then, the link is one of conception. As Boyd originally framed the service as the section, the role of a contemporary SHS would not simply lie in the provision of design, but in the larger argument and consolidation of thinking around what might need

to change, in the building of new audiences and in networks of interrogation and action.

For the students, one of the things that the Small Homes Service built was a particular kind of resident, and this became apparent through the presentation of the research material. For the students, the overarching lesson was the discovery of an ambitious and fearless public, interested in new ways of living, empowered by this new ability to be conversant in the design of modern buildings and the language of architecture. The challenge was trying to capture this complexity through something as reductive as an exhibition, a reflection of the scheme’s complexity rather than the students’ ability to capture it.

Acknowledgements

Monash University Department of Architecture research units and subsequent exhibition project owe their success to the cumulative and collaborative work of the students and the support of other participants - Small Homes Service employees, occupants, builders, and their families; The Robin Boyd Foundation; Steven Coverdale; Peter McIntyre; and Tony Lee.

Students

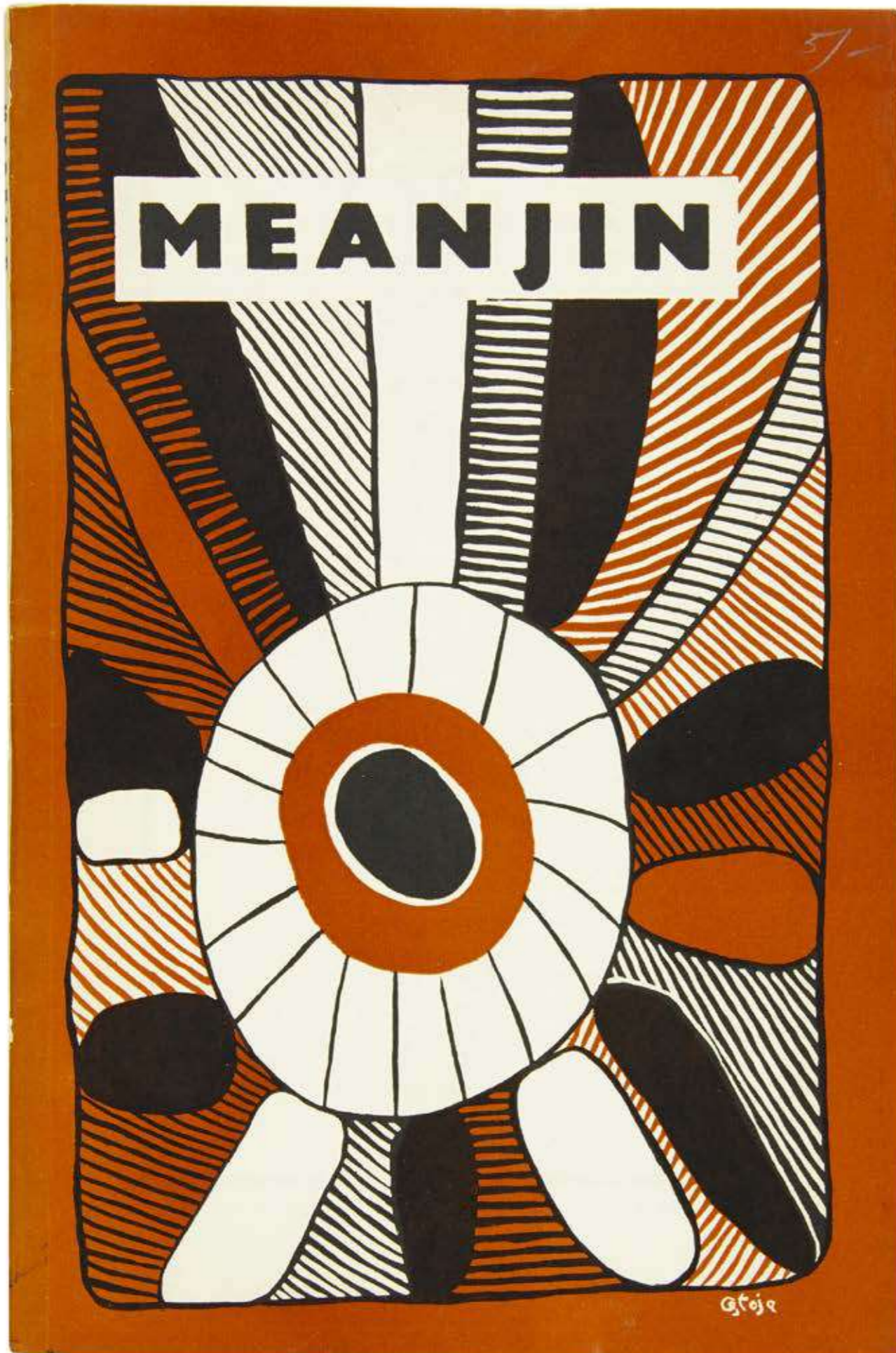
Aaron Abud-Rouch, Kieran Benson, Sarah Birthisel, Claire Burtscher, Jacob Cutri, Timothy Daborn, Jamie Danino, Rachael De Iongh, Brayden Dodds, Christopher Duckworth, Christine Eid, Rhett Ellis, Christina Erng, Alexander Ferrier, Adam Goh, Rachael Hirth, Neryse Jorgensen, Callan King, Andy Lei, Samuel Lingard, Sarah Mason, Emily McBain, Amy Morrison, Jared Nimiczeck, Katrina Owers, Melissa Parker, Matilda Parolini, Thierry Pydiah, James Taylor, Yue Zhan, Antony Zoides, James Yan

Tutors

Charlotte Day, Virginia Mannering, Naomi Stead

Endnotes

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- 19 Robin Boyd, ‘The People Choose a House’, *The Age*, July 23, 1947, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article206045190>.
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- 24 Boyd and other directors did not design all SHS plans, but rather curated a selection that included designs supplied by other architects.
- 25 Student interview with the Denheld Family, Melbourne, April 5, 2019.



Robin Boyd, *Meanjin* and the problem of culture, 1948–1961

Karen Burns



PEER
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ESSAY

Cricket, Critics and Culture

In late December 1958, Clem Christesen, the editor of *Meanjin* magazine wrote to architect Robin Boyd inviting him to make up a cricket eleven for the match between *Meanjin* and *Overland*, the two journals of the Australian literary left.

The game would be a social affair at Stanhope, the Desbrowe Annear designed house the Christesen's owned near Eltham station on the rural periphery of Melbourne.¹ A cursory scan of *Meanjin's* index doesn't reveal this degree of familiarity between the editor and the architecture critic. Boyd published only two essays in the journal for as Christesen observed, a small magazine could not compete with the fees of the "big boys", the mass media newspapers.² Nevertheless Boyd's key Australian books of 1952 and 1960 were well reviewed in the journal and *Meanjin* kept an active press-cuttings file on him, right up to the final obituaries. In the late 1950s Boyd was a key figure in *Meanjin's* public push for a government-inquiry into the state of the Australian arts.³ These social and intellectual connections underpinned their shared vision of culture.

This partnership occurred at a time of critical historical transition and contests over culture. Boyd's role as a cultural theorist rather than an architecture critic has been under addressed. However, writers on Australian cultural studies have briefly noted his place in the formation of Australian cultural studies during the 1960s when a cluster of key texts debated suburbia, popular culture and national identity.⁴ The origin narrative for Australian cultural studies might be set even earlier in the years of the long 1950s. In these post-war years Boyd and the *Meanjin* writers worked at the confluence of three key intellectual currents. They mobilised continuing English debates on culture and civilisation inherited from the nineteenth century, worked within the lineage of an Australian left (socialist) nationalist cultural formation, and crucially engaged with the post-war expansion of mass industrial culture, often viewed as North American. The intersection of these three tributaries produced strange dislocations as older views on the relationship between high culture and authentic mass vernacular culture proved inadequate to theorise the post-war emergence of new mass industrial cultural forms.

Tracing Boyd's affiliations with the *Meanjin* world view of culture provides an insight into the larger concepts that animated Boyd's architectural histories. In so doing we understand how and why his accounts of the house, the suburbs, the architectural profession and municipal planners were contorted to address problems of taste, minority culture, mass culture, national identity and the lost ideals of a past organic society and working-man's paradise. Boyd's entanglement with these big issues ensured part of the contemporary interest in his work. Retrospectively these big issues provide a portal onto the fraught contradictions of a left-leaning vision of culture that held onto an alliance with

a mythical idea of the people but not with the contemporary popular.

A Little Magazine

Meanjin was founded in Brisbane in 1940 as *Meanjin Papers* by poet-editor Clem Christesen. The journal's title referred to the Indigenous name for the spike of river-bound land on which settler Brisbane was erected.⁵ After negotiations in 1944 the magazine moved to Melbourne in early 1945 where it was housed not always happily, at the University of Melbourne. *Meanjin* was self-conscious about its identity as a radical, "little" literary magazine, one of the main media formats for cultural modernism. The literary press was crucial in making and disseminating social, political and literary ideals and in the creation of oppositional spaces or counter-public spaces.⁶ In a private letter written in late 1949 Christesen noted that "The main supporters of *Meanjin* are the "common man" - school teachers, students, writers and would-be writers, a cross-section of middle-class people. ... Not the "upper crust", not the wealthy, not the average working man, not even the so-called 'educated class'".⁷ However the list of subscribers comprised mainly academics and wealthy businessmen.⁸ Christesen's commitment to the common reader invoked an imagined mass readership of relatively unprivileged social status.

Beyond *Meanjin's* imagined audience of eager but not university-educated readers lay a larger cultural world. Raymond Williams once famously asserted that "culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language".⁹ *Meanjin* and Boyd engaged the three general definitions of culture identified by Williams; of culture as a set of timeless ideals, of culture as the documentation of cultural activity and of culture as a sociological definition invested in culture as a way of life.¹⁰ The relationship between cultural activity and the larger world was declared in a Winter 1949 issue when *Meanjin* reprinted a small column from the *Times* on "The Literary Magazine". Quoting T. S. Eliot, the column asserted that the avant-garde literary review is "his weapon against society" being "a reflection both of the standard and of the nature of contemporary taste".¹¹

Taste standards concerned *Meanjin* authors. Writing in a 1949 issue of the journal, music critic Kenneth Hince worried that the force of commerce in Australian music was able "to steer public taste in the most profitable direction".¹² Artist Ian Bow writing in *Meanjin* in 1952 slammed the "ghastly good taste" evident in the works of the 1951 Victorian Artists' Society exhibition. Deriding the "popular conception of good taste", he described this in Australian painting as "unquestionably competent work resulting

Opposite
Meanjin, A Literary Magazine, ed. C B Christesen, 48, no.1 (Autumn 1952): 31. RMIT Design Archives. Cover design S. Ostoja-Kotkowski, © 2019 Estate of J S Ostoja-Kotkowski

Continued

Opposite

Robin Boyd,
Australia's Home.
Its Origins, Builders
and Occupiers.
(Carlton, VIC: Melbourne
University Press, 1952),
RMIT Design Archives,
Roy Simpson Collection.
© 2019 Estate of Robin
Boyd, courtesy Robin
Boyd Foundation

from long practice". It was "a form of middle of the road caution".¹³ Bow obviously borrowed the concept from John Betjeman's *Ghastly Good Taste* (1933), a survey of the rise and fall of English architecture. The English *Architectural Review* for whom Boyd began writing in 1951, also continued Betjeman's campaign against "good taste".¹⁴ Good taste Bow averred "should imply first a knowledge of the extremes at any level of human experience or endeavour, and then a sound judgment". His definition fused the traditional definition of taste as an exercise of discriminating judgement with an avant-garde fervour for subjecthood grounded in agonism and alienation.¹⁵

Meanjin's oppositional culture was framed by the vision of the embattled creative artist. In the 1961 Report from the Arts and Letters Enquiry Committee, Christesen declared, "One of the reasons for this failure to achieve vigorous growth is that the (*Australian*) artist has been insufficiently equipped, stimulated, nourished by the kind of society in which he has been born".¹⁶ Training audiences in the exercise of taste would develop a receptive climate and support for the arts. The notion of training taste was a long-standing project, first articulated in nineteenth-century Britain. The instrumentalisation of art and architecture as tools for shaping subject formation had been announced early in the nineteenth century in the 1835–36 Select Committee on Arts and Manufactures. This project sparked the nineteenth-century boom in museums and government schools of design, but this instrumentality was qualified, contested and modulated.¹⁷ *Meanjin's* commitment to the common man thus stood alongside a larger project to critique and transform Australian taste so that it would support Australian cultural activity.

An embattled avant-garde rhetoric characterised the magazine's portraits of culture, artists and thinkers. Even academics in the later 1950s were portrayed as "rebels against orthodoxy". This oppositional formation was accelerated undoubtedly by the increasingly hostile Cold War climate of the 1950s. In 1955 Christesen and his wife were compelled to appear before the Royal Commission on Espionage. All through these years the magazine defended civil liberties, with one contributor declaring that, "intellectuals are a suppressed minority" and are "entitled to consideration".¹⁸ In this vision of the critical minority *Meanjin* echoed the phrase famously wrought by English literary critic F. R. Leavis in his *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture* of 1930, "In any period it is upon a small minority that the discerning appreciation of art and literature depends: it is (apart from cases of the simple and familiar) only a few who are capable of unprompted, first-hand judgment". Leavis went on to quote I.A. Richards asserting that "criticism is not a luxury trade. The rear-guard of Society cannot be extricated until the vanguard has gone further".¹⁹

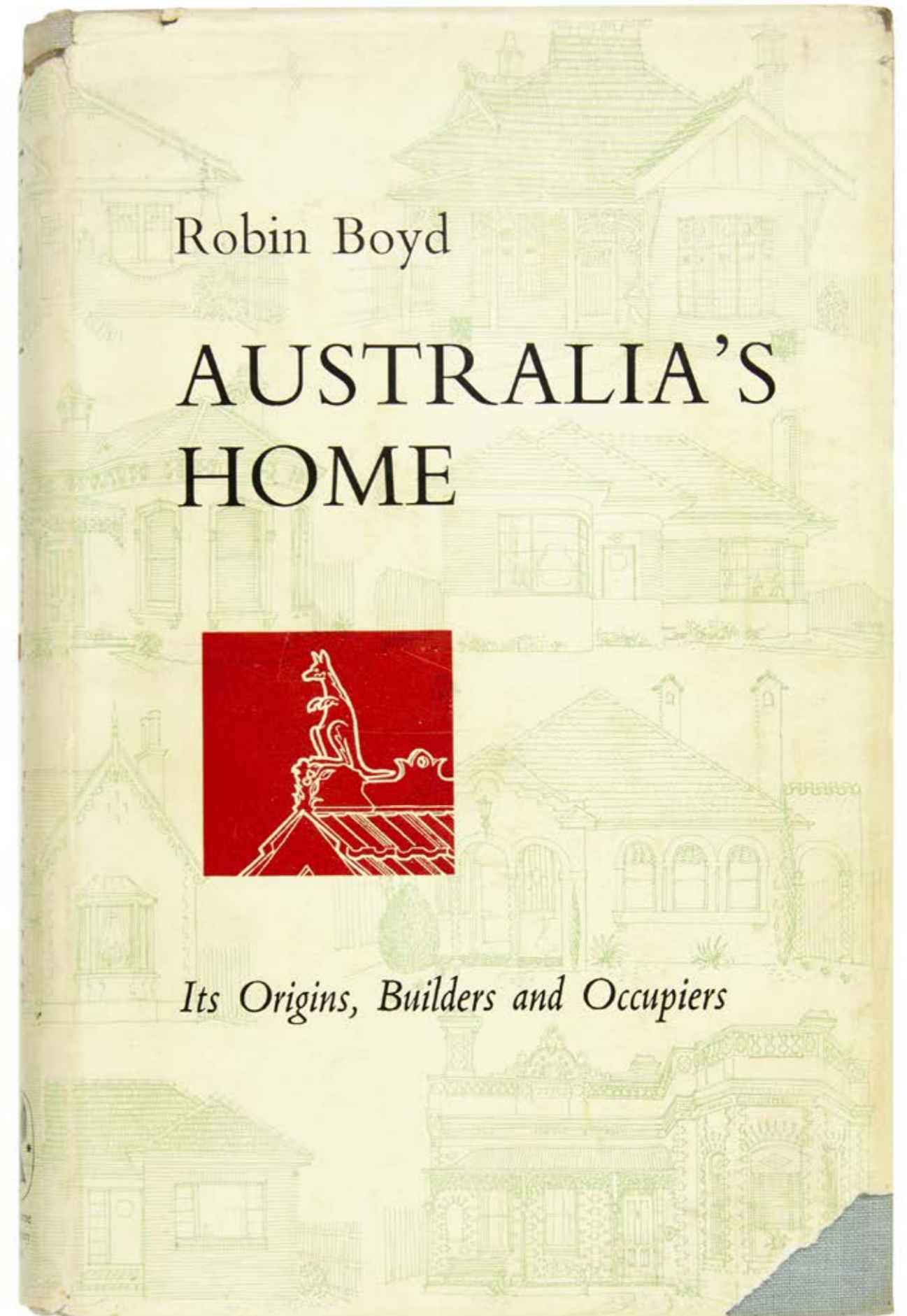
Through the 1950s Leavis was the "house-muse" of the University of Melbourne English Department.²⁰ During the 1920s when Leavis and his wife and fellow critic Q. D. Leavis advocated English as a university subject they battled against the hegemony of Classics and Philology. As the Marxist critic Terry Eagleton observed, they were "radical in respect

of the literary-academic Establishment, coterie-minded to the mass of the people".²¹ This vision of an enlightened critical minority who were not of the establishment underlay Christesen's commitment to a common reader of school teachers (not university academics who were privileged), students, writers and would-be writers. This small circle would need to transform the taste of established orthodoxy and the mass taste susceptible to commerce. Problems in taste could issue from protective bourgeois habits or more aggressive agents - such as commerce - who preyed on public taste. The attribution of taste problems to mythological agents such as "middle of the road caution" or in Boyd's case suburbia rather than precise historical events and figures enabled a continuously oppositional mind set. The shape and nature of the opposition could change but it was always there. Operating in this mythological realm enabled a continuing commitment to the left politics of the common man and social progress as ideals to be achieved and invoked.²² In this way you could maintain the motivating ideal as a lost past or distant future prospect and still lambast and fight over its current doleful circumstances.

National Taste

In choosing to make the "small house, its builders and occupiers" the subject of his 1952 book *Australia's Home*, Boyd addressed the issue of mass housing and thus mass culture. He did not describe *Australia's Home* as a study in taste but various comments in the narrative reveal that he conflated the history of the Australian home with a history of Australian taste.²³ Describing the arrival of each successive wave of style imported from overseas, Boyd noted, "Taste changed slowly at first".²⁴ Elsewhere he quoted the late nineteenth-century Australian architect E. Wilson Dobbs who in 1892 praised the new "sparkle" in "the current of popular taste" leading Boyd to observe that, "The current taste did not pass unnoticed by the educated public" thus distinguishing between popular and educated taste.²⁵ By fixing on the home as a specific lens for revealing Australian culture, Boyd was following in the footsteps of London's Osbert Lancaster whose *Homes Sweet Homes* of 1939 had declared, that "the history of the home provides the most intimate, and in some ways the most reliable picture of the growth and development of European culture; at all periods the average man (or for that matter the abnormal man) has revealed most clearly his prejudices, his standards and his general outlook in the ordering of his most intimate surroundings".²⁶ Lancaster was a contributor to *The Architectural Review*. The structure of Boyd's historic narrative which marched from the Georgian to the modernist pioneers reflected the historical teleology advanced by another Architectural Review contributor, Nikolaus Pevsner in his 1936 book *Pioneers of the Modernist Movement*. Like Pevsner, Boyd lauded the architects of the Australian Arts and Crafts Movement, those he called "pioneers" as precursors to modernism. Despite these English sources *Australia's Home* was also inflected by a local left historiography that animated his particular portrait of Australia suburban taste and its small houses as the manifestation of an Australian way of life.

This current was detected in 1952 when the Viennese



Following Pages

Robin Boyd,
“The Architect and
the Anchor”, *Meanjin*,
(Autumn 1952): 30–31.
RMIT Design Archives.
© 2019 Estate of Robin
Boyd, courtesy Robin
Boyd Foundation

trained art historian and Melbourne University art history lecturer Franz Philipp, picked up the Australian bent of Boyd’s book in his review published in *Meanjin*. Describing it initially as “an important and courageous book” he noted that Boyd had “fallen prey to what I would call a national *mystique*”.²⁷ Boyd’s nationalist prism rendered the small home a uniquely indigenous phenomenon, but Philipp countered with some acute historical claims. He observed that the majority of convicts and settlers would have been more familiar with the “tenement, the over-crowded country cottage and the workhouse”.²⁸ He noted that the small home became an “Australian institution” from the 1870s onwards due to a set of intersecting social, economic and ideological factors.²⁹ Elsewhere he took issue with the “animosity and melodrama” of Boyd’s commentary on the Georgian homestead as settler escapism.³⁰ When it came to the centrality of home and suburb in Boyd’s study however, Philipp did not challenge Boyd’s focus and asserted that the author has “not spared the social and cultural shortcomings of suburbia”. Moreover, Boyd he noted, has “described so convincingly the paralysing impact of the small house and of its sum – suburbia – on the communal life and consciousness of its residents”.³¹ Given this forceful critique Philipp was puzzled by Boyd’s claim that the small home was an achievement. This apparently internal contradiction emanated from Boyd’s advocacy of the mass housing ideal despite the current triumph of the individual private home. This split between a motivating collective ideal and the failures of the present allowed a commitment to a left-wing politics of social progress and the masses to be maintained alongside a savage cultural critique of current circumstances.

Philipp was shrewd in sniffing out Boyd’s nationalist mystique. The link to a powerful, left, nationalist vision was betrayed in Boyd’s citation in the pages of Australia’s Home of only one secondary Australian history. He quoted from Brian Fitzpatrick’s 1946 work *The Australian People 1788–1945*. Fitzpatrick was another long-term contributor to, and supporter of *Meanjin*. Fitzpatrick’s earlier *Short History of the Australian Labour Movement* had styled the “history of the Australian people” as “the history of a struggle between the organised rich and the organised poor”.³² *The Australian People* cast this theme as an early conflict between small land-holders and large land-holders with the later nineteenth-century producing a series of conflicts between trade unions and organised employers. Fitzpatrick drew heavily on writer Vance Palmer’s portraits of Australian literature and pictorial art, with the apex of cultural production flourishing from the 1870s to the 1890s.

Covering this same territory, Boyd’s chapter on the Boom Style reflected a progressive optimism propelled by the Left’s successes in this period. Boyd wrote, “the colonies began to think as a nation. Here was the working-man’s paradise growing sunnier before the eyes; the eight-hour day an accepted principle; the trade unions exhilarated by a chain of successful arguments with capital...”.³³ Over the page, quoting directly from Fitzpatrick’s *The Australian People 1788–1945* Boyd set the cultural nationalist, labour, tone, in Fitzpatrick’s words, “In those days, there was created in the Australian bush (or, in the *Bulletin* office of the bush), a

confident, vivacious, demanding mood which coloured the Australian outlook”.³⁴ Fitzpatrick was one of a number of Australian intellectuals bolstered by the 1890s promise of a working-man’s paradise yet disappointed by the failure of its realisation. This vision of a lost left social and cultural formation enabled present circumstances and the masses to be compared to this idealised past and to be castigated for their contemporary state. Boyd’s choice of the home and suburbia as the thread from which to draw an Australian history can be set within this left intellectual tradition. The blurb on the back of *Australia’s Home* reads “Collectively, they are an outstanding achievement; but individually they have been prey to thoughtless habits and fickle fancies.”

Two other long-term *Meanjin* contributors Vance and Nettie Palmer were part of the generation of intellectuals ascendant in the pre and post first-world-war years who established “suburbia” as a crucial opponent of the nation’s socialist promise. In describing this formation Tim Rowse notes the influence of playwright Louis Esson – another *Meanjin* star in the cultural canon – in generating negative associations for “suburbia”. Esson’s play *The Time Is Not Yet Ripe* (1912) recounted the trials of socialist vision and the election campaign of aspiring M.P. Sydney Barret. Amongst his aphorisms Barrett observed, “The suburban home must be destroyed. It stands for all that is dull and cowardly and depressing in modern life. It endeavours to eliminate the element of danger in human affairs.”³⁵ Vance Palmer’s 1921 essay “Australia’s Transformation” denounced the “dominance of villadom.” Palmer’s immersion in the socialist ferment of the 1910s gave way to a bleak sense of national failure. By this account, both urbanisation and suburbanisation were destroying bush values.³⁶

Boyd’s vision of the development and triumph of housing in Australia was shaped by a powerful vision of the ideal of collective achievement overpowered by individualism. Brian Fitzpatrick’s history of *The Australian People*, had in passing, presented the view of American historian Carter Goodrich that Australian was defined by “collectivism” in comparison to North America’s “individualism”.³⁷ Boyd’s chapter 18 “Politics” connected various collective organisations and experiments, from the history of labour traditions, to the formation of the Institute of Architects, to recent mass housing experiments and the 1948 controversy of the Labour party’s plan to nationalise the banks, or “in the propaganda of the time” observed Boyd, as a “take over the private house”.³⁸ Boyd had been intimately involved in the election campaign fought on this issue. After declining to stand for the doomed mission of Labour candidate for the privileged inner Melbourne suburb of Toorak, Boyd campaigned for the candidate who lost but later became the publisher of Melbourne University Press.³⁹

In the “Politics” chapter, the intersection of government and housing was threadbare for as Boyd asserted, the history of the Australian home was a history of comparatively rare government directed housing production, or “direct political influence on the private house.”⁴⁰ For Boyd the private monopoly was threatened in 1948 by the proposed nationalisation of the banks. He catalogued a few experiments and a few ultimately unfulfilled possible forays

into government housing but Boyd opined, “The failure of this project made Left-wing politicians realize that the tangled, disorganized building industry would socialize in its existing form about as happily as housework”.⁴¹ The “Politics” chapter ends by noting the advent of cooperative housing societies after the Second World War. Of these Boyd observes that, “An organic society in which the happiness of the people themselves is the best answer to the threats of the present social order.”⁴² The promise and failure of the collectivist 1880s/1890s finds resonance in the failures of the late 1940s. Boyd finishes the chapter, by declaring, “But there seemed to be little future in such ventures.” For “The Australian home-owner remained essentially an uncooperative individualist”.⁴³ The Melbourne University Press archives contain material for a proposed promotional campaign for *Australia’s Home*, including a proposed letter to be sent to all Secretaries of Co-operative Housing Societies in Victoria.⁴⁴

In holding fast to the dream of an organic community, Boyd sited himself within a lineage of nineteenth and twentieth-century intellectuals who proposed this vision as an antidote to the evils of industrialism and materialism. From the cooperative movement of Robert Owen, to Ruskin’s Gothic workmen, Augustus Welby Pugin’s parish church ideal to William Morris’s village utopias. This list represented a varied range of political formations, given Pugin’s support for a manorial, paternalist community. Matthew Arnold’s praise of poetry as perfection, “sweetness and light”, poetry as “human nature perfect on all its sides” in *Culture and Anarchy* (1867) rearticulated the ideal of an organic work of art as a tool of “social management”, an instrument for shaping subjectivity, of culture as a civilising ideal.⁴⁵

F. R. Leavis opened his 1930 book *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture* with a quotation from Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy*, but his work expanded beyond Arnold’s opposition to the forces of mechanisation and industrialisation. Leavis opposed Americanisation and discerned new forms of “mass-production and standardisation” in new media formations – the newspaper press and films.⁴⁶ He derided films “a practice of passive diversion”, rejected the “standardising” influence of broadcasting and advertising and asserted that the new mass medium of the press produced “a process of levelling down”.⁴⁷ In a continuation of the long lineage of an anti-industrial culture that affirmed the vitality of organic modes of production, Leavis praised the ideal of the “living subtlety of the idiom”, of spoken language and the transcription of oral heritage in literature.⁴⁸ Words he asserted, were our chief link with the past “and with one another and the channel of our spiritual inheritance” because “as the other vehicles of tradition, the family and community for example, are dissolved, we are forced more and more to rely on language”. The commitment to an organic ideal of culture and the work of art would re-surface in Boyd’s *The Australian Ugliness*.

When *Australia’s Home* was reviewed the *Argus*, the writer picked out Boyd’s undercurrent of interest in taste and made it a central focus of the review. He declared that the

book was of “considerable importance” and noted that, “Architectural tastes have been so debased in Australia that few of us have any real standards of judgment”. This text provides a different reception focus to Philipp’s concerns with Boyd’s historical and rhetorical distortions. The review reveals a commitment to mass media newspapers as taste makers. *The Argus* reviewer continued this line of thought by emphasising an education in the history of styles as the basis for forming taste. He wrote, “Good taste is acquired, and its acquisition depends to a huge extent on a study of the history of style and the philosophical basis of the art in question”. *Australia’s Home* could function as a pedagogical tool, although its account of the “monstrosities that the tasteless have run up at different times is occasionally a little cruel”.⁴⁹ The reception in the *Argus* showed the dangers that Boyd and *Meanjin* ran in maintaining a collectivist ideal whilst virulently castigating the agents of corruption of the masses and the masses’ capitulation to this corruption. Socially progressive aspirations could be easily excised by readers eager to join in the castigation of the common people.

Cold War Intellectuals: The 1950s Avant Garde

In the interim years between the writing of *Australia’s Home*, and *The Australian Ugliness Meanjin* published two essays by Boyd consonant with *Meanjin*’s avant-garde vision. In 1951 Boyd was commissioned to review a centenary exhibition of architecture in Victoria. In this piece Boyd used the paradigm of an embattled avant-garde. He portrayed architecture as an alienated art form, estranged from the general public for “the normal sensitive art-conscious layman . . . still does not consider architecture seriously”.⁵⁰ Architecture’s status as a profession required Boyd to jump through rhetorical hoops to analogise architects within the tradition of the starving, unappreciated artist. He declared, “many a young architect has become the spiritual artist-starving-in-a-garret” of this country.⁵¹ Architecture was placed in the pantheon of the arts through its status as a medium, although Boyd qualified this by noting that architecture has its limitations as an expressive medium. In the end he argued “architects are content with the limitations of their medium, believing that our restrictions on free expression imposed by function are in fact spurs to creative desire”.⁵² He portrayed an embattled minority, of only ten percent of architectural graduates who have “seriously dedicated themselves” to architecture, “in spite of, and perhaps stimulated by, a sure knowledge that an apathetic and sometimes hostile reception is assured them”.⁵³

This vision of an embattled visionary minority in architecture was given another twist in Boyd’s only other *Meanjin* piece in this decade. His “Look Back in Apathy” essay was commissioned after Christesen had read a Reyner Banham article in the *New Statesman*.⁵⁴ Christesen wanted “an article on the need for ‘Angry Young Architects’ in Australia. Although he qualified this by wryly noting, ‘(I am rather tired of the phrase ‘Angry Young . . . ‘ but it conveys the idea of revolt against the Establishment.”⁵⁵ Boyd catalogued different formations of Australian architectural anger, from the angry public -the layman made furious “as a building which he considers arty but impractical” to a chronicle of

his personal and cosmic grief, to his sensuality of imagery, his highly-developed tactile sense.

It is thus a summing-up of his main themes; but it also repeats many of the key phrases from his earlier poems. This, I feel, is not a mere coincidence. 'Five Bells' is, in a sense, Slessor's manifesto, the occasion for a summing-up of all he has tried to say in poetry, and of all the ways he has discovered of saying it effectively.

It is this which makes us wonder whether he will ever write again. For what is there to say that has not already been said? What poetic opportunity can be given to Slessor greater than the opportunity he has so powerfully seized in 'Five Bells'? Despite the chatter of the critics, he is not really an 'intellectual' poet. It is true that he has eschewed the easy path of Georgian nature description, and has gone his own way. But his poetry shows that he was led on that way not by the demands of his intellect continually to discover and re-create the deepest truths of the human situation, but by the romantic desperation of his preoccupations. For all his joy, there is in all his poetry a faint background of disgust with life. In 'Five Bells,' this has been brought forward as an open protest against life. No poet of Slessor's kind can do more than this — make his preoccupations public. This is what *he* has done; but it is not what we expect of an 'intellectual' poet.



Robin Boyd

THE ARCHITECT AND THE ANCHOR

LATE LAST YEAR an exhibition entitled 'A Century of Architecture in Victoria' was held in Melbourne. It was the first public architectural show for twelve years and notable above all others ever held in this city because of its location: the National Gallery of Victoria.

By invading the home of an indubitably 'fine' art, the 'useful' art of building invited judgment upon itself as a fine art, and by people who should know the difference.

Looking over the photographs, it did seem that there were, after all, quite a number of presentable buildings in Victoria. It is only necessary to look out the nearest window to correct this impression, but a hundred or so works of some intelligence, isolated from the million bad buildings of the century, did seem to make an entertaining show of artistic endeavour.

Judging by some of the press reviews, however, even the best works did not convince most normally appreciative laymen of their qualifications to be considered seriously as art. There can be no doubt that the normal, sensitive, art-conscious layman, patron of music, painting, the theatre and various other forms, still does not consider architecture seriously, is out of sympathy with its aims and unappreciative of the few sincere works which are infrequently built. It may surprise some laymen to know that quite a number of architects take their work very seriously, even to the extent of approaching the problems of building at times with a somewhat precious attitude which would result, if permitted licence, in works which could hardly be finer or less useful.

Because permission is never granted, many a young architect has become the spiritual artist-starving-in-a-garret of this country, and enough frustraton neurosis to fascinate any psychiatrist is prevalent to-day in younger architectural circles.

There can be no doubt that many of the architects represented in this exhibition were working at building with as great a devotion to art and almost as little interest in utility as a composer or a poet has.

They are open to criticism on this denial of what most conservatives would consider the first requirement of architecture. But though their interest in function may have been slight, it goes

Continued

Opposite

Robin Boyd,
The Australian Ugliness,
foreword by John
Betjeman, (Ringwood,
Vic: Penguin, 1970),
RMIT University Library
Special Collection,
Peter Corrigan Collection,
cover illustration Barry
Tutt, photographs in
text by Nigel Buesst

the anger of a young generation of architects incredulous at the overnight conversion of established Australian architects to modernism. These old men “had not even heard of these ethics” Boyd declared. The term ‘angry young men’ had derived from English playwright John Osborne’s play *Look Back in Anger*. His text was scathing of the status quo and middle-class smugness and stood in solidarity with the working class. The term was incoherently applied to a group of disparate writers and philosophers in England, but the concept denoted post-war rebelliousness and an ‘angry’ outsider position. When the *Meanjin* issue was reviewed in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the journalist commended Boyd’s essay, noting, “among the liveliest items are a study of Australia’s docile young architects”.⁵⁶ Anger would be a powerful current in Boyd’s next major book *The Australian Ugliness*, published in 1960 by Andrew Fabinyi, a publisher at Cheshire and frequent contributor to *Meanjin* in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Writing some years after the book’s publication Fabinyi declared to Boyd that *The Australian Ugliness* was a “watershed in the growth of Australian self-criticism”. Its publication, he observed, was “an act of courage perhaps by both of us”.⁵⁷ The contextual meaning of these statements comes to light if we look at the issues faced by *Meanjin* and its contributors in the previous decade. Throughout the 1950s *Meanjin* was embroiled in the turmoil of the Cold War and McCarthyism, with a public accusation in 1954 of communism.⁵⁸ The journal published a number of articles on the “mounting assault on civil rights” as one writer observed when chronicling the ‘hysteria’ on American radio.⁵⁹ One contributor argued in 1953 that “freedom of controversy” “is so vital to democracy”.⁶⁰ In this context of nationalism, patriotism and McCarthyism, criticism of the national “way of life” might have seemed a brave rebuttal of a nationalism mobilised in the service of curtailed civil liberties and threats to free speech.

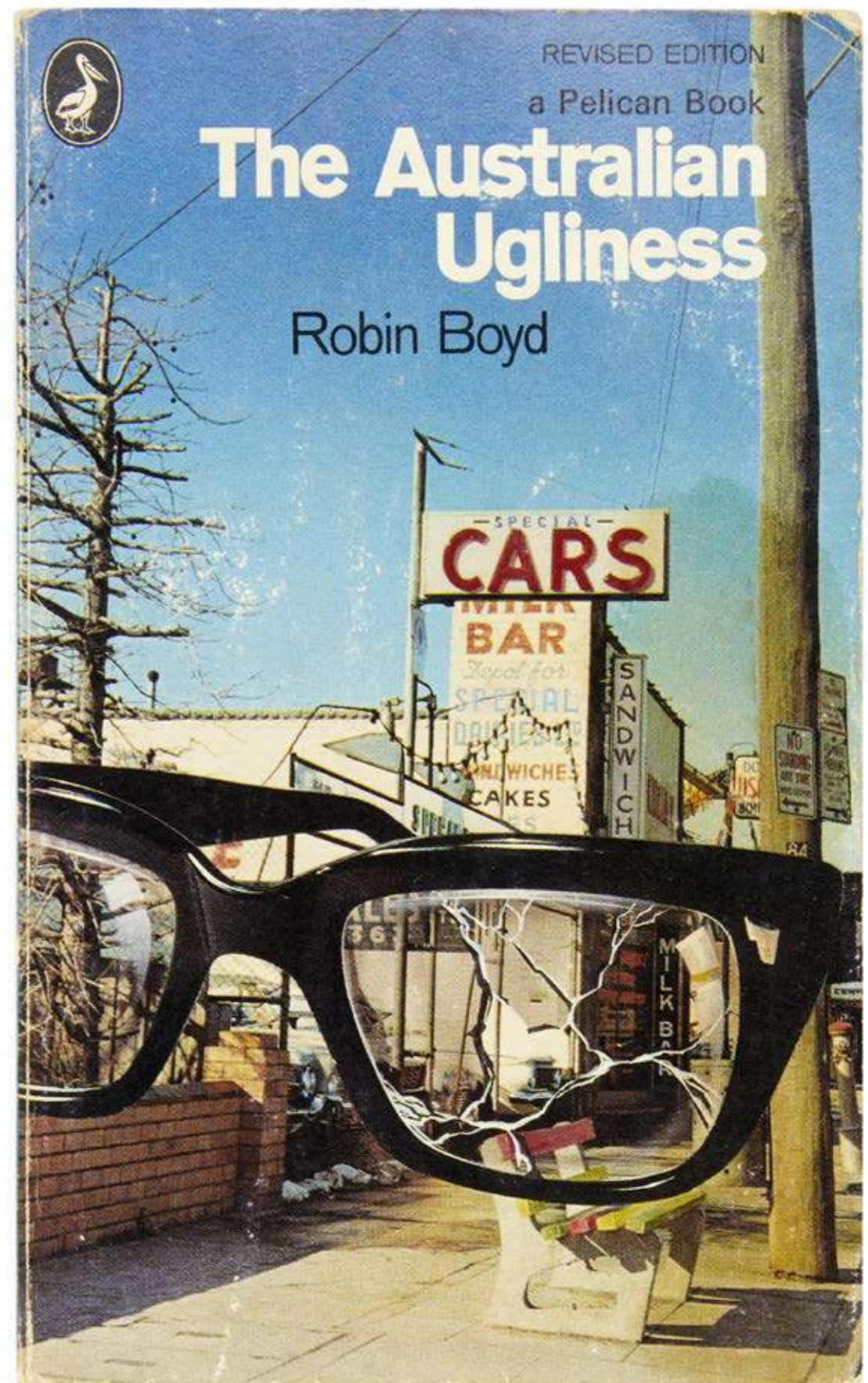
The attacks on American culture in *Meanjin*’s pages through the 1950s were inseparable from the journal’s close watch over the battles around cultural freedom in Cold War North America. Certainly F. R. Leavis in *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture* extended the culture and civilisation tradition of Matthew Arnold with a division on the one hand between high literary intellectual culture and the disinterested pursuit of knowledge, and on the other side, the forces of anarchy, utilitarianism, materialism and the dehumanising effects of industry. The conflation of American and popular culture was evident in one 1954 *Meanjin* essay by Albert E. Kahn. He derided comics and television, arguing that tv would “pour an unending torrent of filth and bestiality into the minds of American children.”⁶¹ Questions of national identity as well as a Leavisite fear of the effects of American popular culture animated this fusillade of rhetoric. This vision of an Americanised mass industrial culture corrupting the Australian populous would animate Boyd’s *The Australian Ugliness*. Later, cultural theorists would sidestep this paradigm of passive consumers by conferring agency on readers and viewers; studying how cultural products were used, interpreted and given meaning by audiences.

Bureaucrats and Beauty

Before the publication of *The Australian Ugliness* in 1960 parts of the book were published in the pages of major newspapers where they drew some support. This positive reception helps us understand how parts of Boyd’s thesis echoed sentiments of the *Meanjin* circle and other citizens. In 1957 the *Age* published passages concerned with the corrosive effect of American culture and an embattled national identity struggling against, “The American invasion by film, radio and periodical”.⁶² There are no recorded letters to the editor. In October 1958 *The Sydney Morning Herald* published Boyd’s work on ugliness. Here Boyd attacked the loss of Sydney’s physical and heritage beauty and argued the preservationist cause. The letters to the editor revealed support for Boyd’s “excellent and accurate observations”.⁶³ This burgeoning community support for preservation and the activist role of citizens intersected with the views of Boyd’s cultural circle. In his review of *The Australian Ugliness*, published in *Meanjin* in April, 1961, National Gallery of Victoria assistant Daniel Thomas, declared, “One can only hope that every politician, municipal councillor, builder, architect and manufacturer had a copy in his Christmas stocking.” Thomas observed that the boom period of the 1950s “destroyed too much of the natural beauty around our cities”.⁶⁴

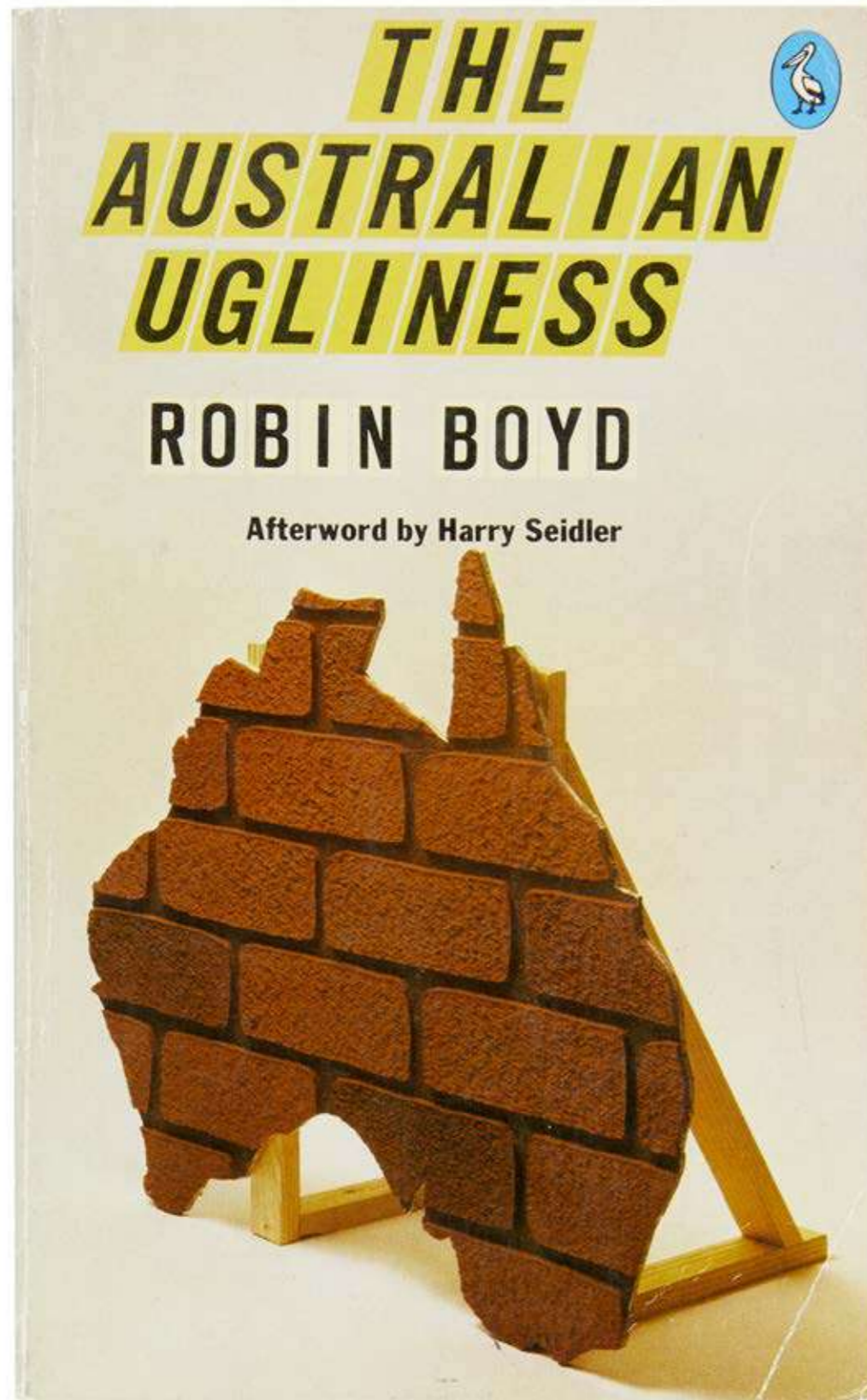
Boyd had touched the nerve of a blossoming citizen action movement around demolition and development. A flyer for a general meeting for the East Melbourne Group public meeting of 7 December 1953 in the Boyd archive documents resolutions of the group proposed by his friend Daryl Lindsay the Director of the National Gallery of Victoria.⁶⁵ Lindsay censured the Council for its neglect of trees and then their removal. The Constitution of the Society declared that its mission was “to conserve trees”, “to foster interest in and understanding of civic affairs, and thirdly “to save, and where possible restore the historic and aesthetic aspect of Melbourne and its environs”.⁶⁶ Municipal philistinism was fused with speculative development as key agents of destruction. Once more the oppositional world view derived from the avant-garde paradigm could be used to capture diverse destroyers of culture.

The *Meanjin* world view permeates *The Australian Ugliness* in Boyd’s leftist derision of late nineteenth-century materialism. Thomas glossed this historical context by observing that, “Prosperity only brought a kind of Neo-Victorianism”.⁶⁷ However, he also pressed Boyd to make a harder declaration noting, “The author might have stressed also the historical misfortune of growing up in the 19th century, when our society was being formed in a period of *laissez-faire* (sic)”.⁶⁸ Boyd’s left politics shrank to a mute note in this book, although his aesthetic ideal of the organic unity of a work of art could be discerned and appreciated by the *Meanjin* reader. Thomas declared, “Boyd’s definition of the trouble is Featurism”, defined as “the subordination of the essential whole, and the accentuation of selected separate features.” – it is always nearly done in the name of beautification”. Thomas asserted that *The Australian Ugliness* “is in fact the Australian Prettiness”, a land of “multi-coloured park benches, the over-tidy suburban



Continued

This Page
Robin Boyd,
The Australian Ugliness,
afterword by Harry
Seidler, (Ringwood, Vic:
Penguin Books, 1980),
RMIT University Library
Special Collection,
Peter Corrigan Collection.
Cover illustration
Mimmo Cozzolino.
©Mimmo Cozzolino



gardens, the bright flower-beds and lack of trees, the pink petunias and rustic rockwork in Martin Place, the coloured panels now inserted in all curtain walls, and the motels, and the suburban banks". The targets are bureaucracy in the form of municipal gardening, new cultural forms derived from America such as the motel, and the banks supporting these developments. In all this, there is Thomas opined, "No awareness of visual unity; nor of what is appropriate". The aesthetic ideal of organic unity and the regulating principle of appropriateness were key principles of British culture in the nineteenth century.

An earlier essay in *Meanjin* may have given Boyd some key ideas for formulating the notion of Featurism. In a 1954 *Meanjin* essay by artist Ian Bow "Sentimentality – Sickly or Brute", Bow derided sentiment, and defined it by a number of examples, such as "the display of large copies of Churchill, Rommel, and Abraham Lincoln at the Melbourne Herald out-door art show".⁶⁹ Sentimental value he declared, "is always non-art value".⁷⁰ Importantly he found architectural examples to support his position noting that a "Sentimental attachment to the past is frequently manifest in imposition of ageing sentimental surface". For Bow "this camouflage" "is apparent in all kinds of contemporary artwork, including Sali Herman's Mid-Victorian Houses. These are effects of "surface", of "scratching, scraping, knifing and brushing often add up to little more than the trapping of antique finish in paint".⁷¹ In *The Australian Ugliness* Boyd catalogued the Australian homemaker's satisfaction with veneer and cosmetic effects.⁷²

In Daniel Thomas's review the ultimate sources of this disintegration of the organic ideal of culture are traced to familiar villains. He is ingenious in stretching this category to include paint manufacturers and advertising as agents of cultural decline. American culture is the villain, lurking in the landscape of Austerica, "A way of life where an austerity version of the American dream overtakes the indigenous culture. It is also slightly hysterical ... It lives by copying the American magazine, but not necessarily the best magazine, and never the latest copy". These were originally nineteenth-century aesthetic terms which valued the original over the culture of the copy.⁷³

The reading of the new mass cultural formation as unreal continued a line of thought formed in the nineteenth century. In these accounts the new industrially produced society was an unreal world, in which the metaphors of the theatre, make-up and fashion (all coded feminine) came to denote this new formation. Boyd declared that "The Australian ugliness begins with a fear of reality, denial of the need for the everyday environment to reflect the heart of the human problem, satisfaction with veneer and cosmetic effects".⁷⁴ Thomas echoed Boyd by observing that "Architecture can only flourish by dismissing the essential unreal concept of beauty".⁷⁵ Quoting Boyd Thomas informs the reader that "The most frivolous Featurist designer, moulding like putty the tastes of a public hypnotised by fashion, acknowledges an instinctive reaction against blatant counterfeit".⁷⁶ Leavis's vision of the hypnotising effects of culture was fused with the Arnoldian nostalgia for the lost organic ideal.

The socially progressive politics of the welfare state ideal of *Australia's Home* were dissolved in *The Australian Ugliness*. Opposition to suburbia was steadfast but it was not condemned as an impediment to the advent of a government financed mass housing program. The home and suburbia embodied the range of forces arrayed against a visionary cultural minority who battled Featurist architects, the degraded taste developed under the impact of American mass culture, and the politicians, municipal councillors, builder, architects and manufacturers engaged in destroying natural and heritage beauty. The book's interest in the question of Australia's post-empire identity for "these quasi-Europeans left in these outposts of a vanished empire" was of long-standing interest to the *Meanjin* crowd.⁷⁷

Boyd's ferocious rhetoric and attacks on the Australian way of life could be interpellated within the magazine's defence of free speech as it withstood the erosion of civil liberties under Cold War hysteria. In holding fast to the dream of an organic work of art, Boyd sited himself within a lineage of nineteenth and twentieth-century intellectuals. But the mood of the book was bitter and portrayed a dream only intermittently realised in the vision of minority pioneers or the organic vernacular of the Georgian period. The tradition of Australia's intellectual left gave Boyd key organising terms for his history of Australian architecture, but it also gave him few resources for how a post-war architecture in a speculative building culture might fulfil the promise of the modernist mass housing ideal.

The world view of culture promulgated by Boyd and his *Meanjin* circle animated and deepened the import of Boyd's architectural analysis but produced incoherencies in his account of culture. He perpetuated the nineteenth-century project of training mass taste whilst holding fast to the late nineteenth-century ideal of the vernacular as an authentic form of mass culture. He fused the avant-garde oppositional paradigm with the Leavisite view of cultural leadership issuing from an enlightened anti-establishment minority who were disdainful of Americanised mass culture. He held on to a leftist vision of collectivism and an organic co-operative society and like other leftist Australian intellectuals venerated late nineteenth century Australia as the site of a working man's paradise. He supported the post war welfare state ideal but was embittered by its Australian failure to realise mass housing. A peculiarly Australian intellectual formation had seized on suburbia as the obstacle and destroyer of socialist vision. Undoubtedly they had inherited the nineteenth century bohemian opposition to bourgeois marriage and domesticity and reshaped this opposition to make suburbia the enemy of broader progressive forces. In *The Australian Ugliness* new enemies – developers, municipal schemers and American commerce and mass industrial culture – joined the ranks of familiar enemies – suburbanites and degraded taste, whether of builders, architects, critics and homeowners. At the very end of the book he observed that, "the search for the realities of design for everyday use is one of the most consequential activities in the cultural life of a nation".⁷⁸ However, the intellectual and social instruments at Boyd's disposal were unable to work through this proposition. The advent of IKEA would provide a close realisation of this ideal.

Endnotes

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Robin Boyd and the Vernacular

Philip Goad



PEER
REVIEWED
ESSAY

In Australian architectural history, the name Robin Boyd is almost always associated with the design and critique of the single-family house. Boyd's involvement as inaugural director of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects' Small Homes Service in 1947 and its associated weekly articles for *The Age* newspaper until 1953, and his 1952 book, *Australia's Home*, still in print today, have been seen as intrinsic to his quest for a new and improved house for everyday Australians. A question, though, that is rarely asked of Boyd's writings and his architecture, is: why this quest, and to whom is this quest being directed?

These questions were entwined with Boyd's relationship to vernacular architecture, a mode of customary building usually distinguished from architectural design. A further question which this essay addresses is which everyday vernacular architecture does Boyd attend to – or not?

To answer these questions, four books written by Boyd between 1947 and 1962, when the target of his writings was most firmly directed towards a readership of everyday Australians, are investigated: *Victorian Modern* (1947); *Australia's Home* (1952); *The Australian Ugliness* (1960) and *The Walls Around Us* (1962). What becomes clear is that Boyd has a fluid approach to the vernacular, one that suits his purpose at any one time, and one that now historically locates Boyd and raises questions about the ongoing relevance of his writings to contemporary definitions of what the vernacular house might mean in Australian architecture.

In past histories of Australian architecture, definitions of the vernacular have been generally reserved for non-architect designed houses constructed by European settlers soon after colonization began in earnest from 1788. Miles Lewis's *Victorian Primitive* (1977)¹ is the most authoritative source of this type and conforms to Paul Oliver's definition of the vernacular:

Vernacular architecture comprises the dwellings and other buildings of the people. Related to their environmental contexts and available resources they are customarily owner- or community-built, utilizing traditional technologies. All forms of vernacular architecture are built to meet specific needs, accommodating the values, economies and ways of life of the cultures that produce them.²

An earlier book such as Philip Cox, JM Freeland and Wesley Stacey's *Rude Timber Buildings in Australia* (1969)³ was a pioneering work but one steeped in the aesthetics of the so-called 'functional tradition', indicative more of visual taste and aligned to a designer's eye (largely that of Cox) that found sustenance in what might be described as the rural vernacular: homesteads, shearing sheds and rural infrastructure. However, for the most part, architectural historians in Australia have aligned the vernacular with

stylistic classification, especially as it related to speculative builders' replications of architectural styles such as the Georgian, the so-called Queen Anne, and into the twentieth century, the Californian Bungalow and the Spanish Mission, essentially to describe what might more simply be called the suburban vernacular. If one accepts the definition of vernacular architecture as one without the pedigree of an architect's hand, then universally omitted from all of these histories was the vernacular architecture of Australia's traditional owners, its Indigenous peoples, a lacuna filled largely by the scholarly work of Paul Memmott and his colleagues at the University of Queensland and most prominently by Memmott's *Gunyah, goondie + wurley: the Aboriginal architecture of Australia* (2007).⁴ More recently, Mirjana Lozanovska has filled in another gap overlooked by these past histories, highlighting the need to acknowledge another form of vernacular, that of the Australian post-war migrant vernacular house.⁵ Put crudely, there would thus appear to be four types or categories that might be described legitimately as the Australian vernacular house and loosely arranged chronologically: Indigenous vernacular; rural vernacular; suburban vernacular; and migrant vernacular.

How then do Boyd's writings stack up against such categorization? Are they still relevant? Or is he now a victim of his own time of writing and do his observations need to be read and understood as period pieces? In other words, has scholarship simply overtaken him?

Indigenous Vernacular

In 1947, when Boyd published his first book, *Victorian Modern: one hundred and eleven years of modern architecture in Victoria, Australia*, almost nothing within strictly architectural circles in Australia had been written on domestic shelter produced by Indigenous Australians, the Aboriginal people who had occupied the continent for more than 60,000 years. In 1945, Walter Bunning in *Homes in the Sun*, had included an illustration of an Indigenous bark and leaf shelter made from sketches that appeared in Captain John Hunter's *An Historical Journal* (1793) but there was no other discussion other than a brief caption.⁶ By contrast, two years later, Boyd acknowledged Aboriginal presence and

Opposite
Robin Boyd, *Victorian Modern: One hundred and eleven years of modern architecture in Victoria, Australia*, (Melbourne: Victorian Architectural Students' Society of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects, 1947), 60, RMIT Library Special Collections, Peter Corrigan Collection. © 2019 Estate of Robin Boyd, courtesy Robin Boyd Foundation



C.1850. INFANCY: SINGLE-ROOM-WIDTH WINGS FORM AN OPEN COURTYARD; A NARROW INTERNAL VERANDAH GIVES ACCESS TO THE ROOMS; JUST SOUTH OF GEELONG, IN WHITE STUCCO ON HANDMADE BRICKS.



C.1870. CHILDHOOD: A LONG BEDROOM BLOCK BUTTS INTO THE SIDE OF A SECONDARY GABLED WING; NEAR BENDIGO; A FORMER HOTEL ROTS IN DISUSE; THE STONE GABLE END IS SUPPORTED BY THREE GROANING POLES.



C.1920. GROWING PAINS: CHUNKY WALTER-BURLEY GRIFFIN DETAIL IS APPLIED BY AN ADMIRER TO A FORM WHICH IS BASICALLY THE SAME AS IN THE FIRST EXAMPLE; IN ARMADALE.



C.1950. COMING OF AGE: A LONG BEDROOM BLOCK MITRES WITH A SECONDARY LIVING ROOM WING, IN A FORM NOT BASICALLY DIFFERENT FROM THE SECOND EXAMPLE; IN CROYDON, THE VICTORIAN TYPE GROWS UP.

These houses are not typical of the mass of building of each age, but they are more related than most to their respective periods. They are the results of conscious efforts to build for Victoria, influenced by a more or less subconscious bias towards contemporary styling tastes: from Gothic, to Renaissance, to moderne, to the current naturalism. The plan form has not radically changed; in these works it has always been based on the spread of single-room-width wings. There has been, however, a wealth of advancement in details. The roof has gradually deflated, but in this Victorian Type it seldom lies quite flat. It compromises in a low pitch, and lately, because the traditional Marseilles tile is not confidently watertight below 25 degrees, light, inexpensive corrugated asbestos-cement sheeting has been eagerly accepted. A glazed gallery has replaced the communicating verandah. Glass development has permitted the biggest of all changes in the later stages, the provision of large windows; as in this example by John Mockridge where the living room wall left of the massive double fire chimney is entirely glass.

THE VICTORIAN TYPE (Page 67)

The Great Asymmetrical Front has developed through nearly seventy years in five principal stages, from the Boom period (2 floors and slate roof—single floor and iron roof) to the brick villa in current favour. The M roof with even ridge height was soon changed to an all-embracing hipped roof. The porch suffered many disturbances, but progress in materials and equipment, and differences in economic levels had no effect on the immutable plan. Concessions to aspect were made in an occasional reversal of the plan to place the verandah on the left, and the addition of an iron hood to the unprotected window of the projecting wing, when the house faced west. Eight of every ten small houses in Victoria must recognise their general likeness to one of the five models at the left.

THE GREAT ASYMMETRICAL FRONT (Page 67)



Victorian Type (cont)



GEORGE AVENUE TOORAK, A KILN-DRY KNILOCK HOUSE OF THE TYPE BUILT ALONG THE NATIVE TREES



ROAD THROUGH THE HILLS BEHIND 1500 FEET HIGH ABOVE THE SEA NOT FAR FROM WESTERPORT BAY.

Some blocks were made on the site. The material is a warm grey. The roof is low, the eaves were lighter, the walls to such an extent that the glazed gallery was numbered.

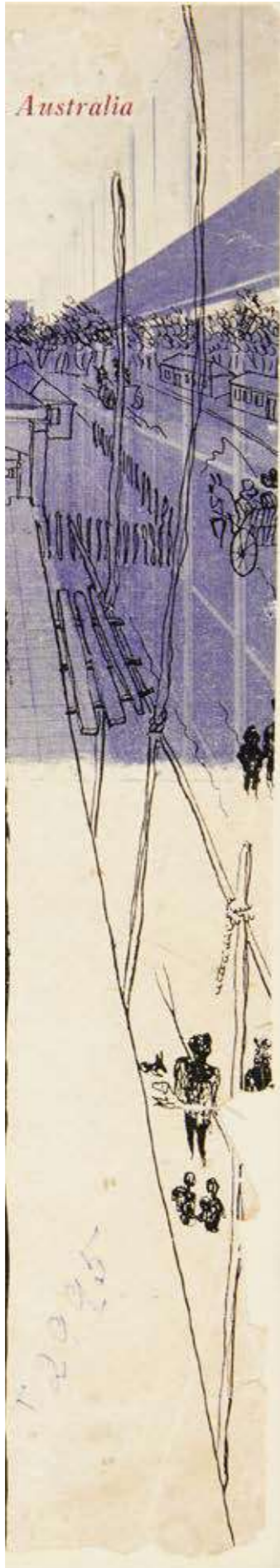


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Robin Boyd,
*Victorian Modern. One
hundred and eleven years
of modern architecture
in Victoria, Australia*,
(Melbourne: Victorian
Architectural Students'
Society of the Royal
Victorian Institute
of Architects, 1947).
RMIT Library Special
Collections, Peter
Corrigan Collection.
Cover illustration Robin
Boyd, © 2019 Estate of
Robin Boyd, courtesy
Robin Boyd Foundation.
[detail]

Opposite

Robin Boyd,
*The Walls Around Us:
The Story of Australian
Architecture Told and
Illustrated for Young
Readers* (Melbourne:
FW. Cheshire, 1962),
RMIT Library, Special
Collections, Peter
Corrigan Collection.
Illustration of Indigenous
shelter drawn by Robin
Boyd. © 2019 Estate of
Robin Boyd, courtesy
Robin Boyd Foundation



on the front cover of his book, where in his own rendition of architect Samuel Jackson's 1841 panorama of early Melbourne, he drew in a group of Aborigines with spears and dingoes directly opposite his title, 'Victorian Modern' and noted that:

Jackson was careful to draw everything he saw: the rutted roads, the uneasy aborigines, the finely feathered colonisers swimming in a brief tide of luxury, the gumtrees retreating before the swelling town.⁷

At age 28, it appeared that Boyd was acutely aware of Aborigines but not their architecture. Further on, he noted a difference in attitude across Australia towards Indigenous peoples. In describing émigré German Gert Sellheim's introduction of Aboriginal motifs, "...five bewildered black men leap in the rubber floor" and where "Arrested in abandoned moments, flattened Australians lie fossilized in the red rubber floor" of Stephenson & Turner's interior for the Victorian Government Tourist Bureau in Collins Street, Melbourne (1939), he noted recent interest in the incorporation of Indigenous motifs into contemporary architecture:

Perhaps coincidentally, constructive scientific research into the aborigines' art also has been growing. It started about the same time as the interior decorators began to caricature the forms.

Ironically, the aboriginal art form is more likely to become popular in Victoria, where there are few aborigines, than in the north; just as in U.S.A., in reversal about the equator, it is the north where the negroes' arts are entertained. In Queensland, there is de-franchisement, Jim Crow laws and sporadic brutality for the Aborigine, and scant interest in his culture. But in Victoria, many whites who have never seen an Aborigine are interested in borrowing his technique in the cause of a national art form.⁸

Yet not, according to Boyd, for a national architecture. By 1952, when Boyd wrote *Australia's Home*: (1952), his appreciation of Aboriginal attitudes to space and shelter was one commonly held and promulgated – largely through ignorance. Boyd's first mention of Aboriginal building in *Australia's Home* comes only at the beginning of Chapter 12, 'Materials and Methods', where in the very first sentence, he writes:

The house, the home, the permanent address – this was the white man's idea; the blacks had no use for it.⁹

Boyd cited this lack of interest or need for permanence by stating that Aboriginal people had not mastered the task of insulation from the elements because they had no need to, fundamentally because, "He knew nothing of agriculture, which might have held him to one place long enough to make building worthwhile. He had not learnt the habits of acquisition and accumulation, which might have led him to make storehouses."¹⁰ Boyd's appreciation of Aboriginal life was that its assumed nomadic status had worked against the making of 'home-building'. Yet in the very next paragraph, Boyd acknowledged Indigenous skill in the use of bark, "cut from the tree in great sheets, sometimes twelve feet by ten feet in size" that could be fashioned into canoes or open

civilization we have, of course, erected much more than shelters for the night. We have made houses galore and many magnificent public buildings, all more or less like the houses and buildings of the northern hemisphere from which we came. But the fact that we were able to copy all the old methods of Europe in this new country does not necessarily mean that we have been wise in copying them. In fact we have not often shown much more native ingenuity than the aborigine in our efforts at adapting the styles of the Old World.

All the exciting buildings of history have been made by men who were faced with a challenge. Sometimes the challenge has been purely physical – how to escape from the freezing cold or the man-eating animals or the murderous enemies. And sometimes the challenge has been in the minds of the builders – how to build the highest spire or the widest clear open space, or how to make the most beautiful, the most perfect structure.

Happily we in Australia have been spared the toughest threats to the physical safety of our bodies, but unhappily also we have accepted few challenges to the mind. But still there have been many instances in our history when some designer who knew the best of the past also used his own brains when constructing things. Then the building has not been just a clever copy of someone else's ideas. It has been an adventure, and has made one of the more exciting chapters in the story.



fronted huts.¹¹ He also acknowledged that the white man "took their word 'humpy' into his language to describe a bush hut."¹² Then Boyd left the subject to focus on European settlers mixed efforts and struggles to adjusting to building in mud and local timbers, claiming: "The Australian's characteristic ability at easy improvisation developed here. Grass, stones, mud and tree trunks were put together in the best order which presented itself at the moment."¹³ In doing so, the trope of unaffected, functional construction that echoes throughout *Australia's Home* emanates not from the sophisticated essentialism of the constructions of the traditional owners of the land but from the colonisers' flawed attempts at permanence.

Eight years later in *The Australian Ugliness* (1960), Boyd makes no mention of Indigenous shelter, but he does acknowledge the "vicious slaughter of the aborigines" in Tasmania, a penal colony which had "killed most of its blacks as objectionable fauna."¹⁴ It is surprising to read

of such strong opinions, which then do not translate to acknowledging any Indigenous building habits. Which then makes all the more surprising, Boyd's inclusion of Indigenous shelter in his next book, written specially for children, *The Walls Around Us: The Story of Australian Architecture Told and Illustrated for Young Readers* (1962).

If there was ever the example of a targeted audience for educating about the value of architecture and architectural history, *The Walls Around Us* was it. For the first time, Boyd included a drawing of his own of an Indigenous shelter, a mia-mia, and on the book's very first page. However, his assessment is typical of the period. He states that the story of building in Australia began when white settlers built the first walls around them and in the next paragraph, states that it needn't have been like that if the Aboriginal people had "been like the original natives of most other regions of the globe", i.e. if they had built conventional permanent buildings like "cabins of rocks" or "huts of sticks" or "on

top of poles out in the water, as some of their New Guinea neighbours did.”¹⁵ Instead Boyd writes:

But they built nothing. They were content to arrange a few clumps of grass and bark as a shield against the night wind and in a few days to move on to new ground in the hope of finding a richer spread of witchetty grubs and roots.¹⁶

Boyd put this down to Aborigines not needing permanent shelter due to a benign climate, no need for defence, a lack of cultivation, and a nomadic existence, hence “no reason to plan permanent houses anywhere.”¹⁷ He even compared them unfavorably to native Americans who carried “a sort of tent or collapsible wigwam” with them as nomads:

The aborigines did not even have anything like that. One has to admit that they were not very bright as builders.¹⁸

Again, though exposing his ignorance, Boyd is not entirely without conscience, asking:

The question which we should think about now is whether we, the white men, have been much brighter... In fact we have not often shown much more native ingenuity than the aborigine in our efforts at adapting the styles of the old world.¹⁹

In later years, Boyd’s knowledge of Indigenous architecture did not increase – at least not as expressed in print – but he did remain alert to questions of aboriginality and the place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australian design history, including, for example, images of Indigenous contact with European settlers in the graphics for his catalogue to his exhibition design, *The First 100 Years*, for the Industrial Design Council of Australia held at Australia Square in Sydney in 1968.²⁰ Additionally, Boyd could not have been unaware of the 1967 referendum that overwhelmingly found in favour the inclusion of Aborigines in determinations of population and which empowered Parliament to legislate specifically for Aboriginal peoples (for their benefit or their detriment).²¹ As presenter of the Australian Broadcasting Commission’s Boyer Lectures for 1967, Boyd also would certainly have been aware of the next year’s speaker, anthropologist Professor WEH Stanner. Following Boyd’s ‘Artificial Australia’ series, Stanner’s seminal five lectures of 1968 titled ‘After the Dreaming’, were landmark prompts for all historians of Australian culture to cease ‘The Great Australian Silence’ and their “cult of disremembering.”²² It’s also highly likely that in Melbourne at least, Boyd would have been aware of Bill Nankivell’s distinctive building for the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League (AAL) in Northcote, 1964-5 with its hyperbolic paraboloid roof and masonry veneer base.²³ Not all architects were ignorant of the needs and concerns of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the 1960s and Nankivell’s building and his involvement with Pastor Doug Nicholls and the AAL was an important indicator of a slow recognition within the profession that it might have something to contribute in working with Indigenous people to consolidate their position within everyday Australian culture.

Rural vernacular

In setting the scene for his construction of the ‘Victorian Type’ in *Victorian Modern* (1947), Boyd fell back on the

primitivist tropes of modernism. As a preface to his description of ‘The Great Asymmetrical Front’ (which would become a major theme of *Australia’s Home* some five years later), Boyd used the example of a concrete water tower in Echuca (“the most functionally satisfying structure in the town”), a hotel in Creswick, and an unidentified hay shed, each exemplifying that:

The Victorian style started in ordered simplicity: the outcome of design innocence, material poverty, and the desire of the builders to get back to the goldfields with the least possible delay.²⁴

On the next page, he used vertically arranged photographs of four gable-roofed houses each with attendant landscapes, showing ‘c.1850 infancy’ (a house south of Geelong), ‘c.1870 childhood’ (a former hotel near Bendigo), ‘c.1920 growing pains’ (a Griffin-recasting of terrace houses in Armadale), and ‘c.1950 coming of age’ (a John Mockridge-designed house [1947] in Croydon), and placed them against his pictorial development of ‘The Great Asymmetrical Front’, code for the apparently unpedigreed development of the suburban vernacular.²⁵ In short, the rural vernacular had been refined by the architect (in this case, Griffin and Mockridge) and developed as the preferred ‘Victorian Type’. Then, from this rapid-fire visual argument, Boyd illustrated the next six pages with contemporary examples of the ‘Victorian Type’, concluding with hope in prefabrication exemplified by Arthur Baldwinson’s steel Beaufort House (1946) and Frank Heath’s urban plans for the country towns of Swan Hill and Seymour, which “may cure the evil consequences of its [Seymour’s] early delinquency.”²⁶ In his text, Boyd found “the greatest cause for optimism” in the planning of regional towns and he cited a string of plans for country towns by architects as leading the way.²⁷

In *Australia’s Home*, this hope in the rural is largely put aside, though not before in the first edition where Boyd included a Max Dupain photograph of a semi-derelict brick and gable roofed farmhouse with verandah accompanied by the caption: “The Forgotten House – Nineteenth-century vernacular in New South Wales”. The inclusion of this photograph is intriguing because the subject of the rural homestead is decidedly not that of *Australia’s Home*. It does not get discussed in any detail. Boyd uses the Dupain image instead as a singular totem or counter to what the suburban house is, and what the rest of his book contains, a detailed account of the development of the suburban vernacular house.

This tactic is repeated visually in another photographic insert, almost as if a reminder of the frontispiece’s message. Opposite page 113, ‘Town’ and ‘Country’ are juxtaposed: a “suburban villa, stripped to austerity in the 1940’s” photographed on a site bereft of trees and bounded by grey, paling fences, sits above a photograph taken by Boyd of “The timeless country cottage – weatherboards on a timber frame, hipped corrugated-iron roof, verandah of shallower pitch like the brim of a hat, trees cleared from a flower garden within a rabbit-proof fence.”²⁸ The homestead has a tree in the foreground and a backdrop of a bush hillside. It was a crude dialectical strategy (one favoured by architectural writers for decades since Gothic Revivalist

AWN Pugin’s *Contrasts* (1836)) – but nevertheless effective and similar to Boyd’s tactics of using persuasive graphics in his writings in *The Age* newspaper for the RVIA Small Homes Service and his ‘Good and Bad Taste’ tableau of 1952 for furniture retailer Bruce Anderson.²⁹

Eight years later in *The Australian Ugliness* (1960), Boyd’s focus shifted to the commercial vernacular and his concept of ‘featurism’ but the early and rural vernacular of colonial settlement made a reappearance in Chapter 6, ‘The Innocent Era’:

...Australia habitually economizes on the formative phase of any production. Hence the scarcity of motives in the Australian backdrop. Hence Featurism.

And yet Australia was not always like this.³⁰

In a direct repetition of Hardy Wilson’s 1924 argument in *Old Colonial Architecture in New South Wales and Tasmania* of cultural decline after the first forty-five years of European settlement, Boyd also argues that “Sydney and Hobart’s records for good building were hardly broken by a single vulgar display during some forty-five years before the other capital cities were founded.”³¹ Boyd goes on to praise warehouses, stables and other utilitarian shelters like the warehouses in Hobart’s Salamanca Place, inns and a cottage in Parramatta with unadorned verandah posts and only the faintest hint of elaboration. He reserves greatest praise though for the Parramatta house, Roseneath (c1835), “still perhaps the best remaining example of the single-storey pre-Featurist colonial house.”³² Boyd then goes on to list in “the back blocks of Tasmania”, the “houses, the stone walls, the cylindrical oast houses, the stables, the lofts, storehouses, pigeon towers, nearly all obey the most simple and rugged masonry lore, and each is shaped by ancient empirical rules to follow its own function.”

For Boyd, their virtue lay in the fact that: “Few of them were consciously designed and none knew fashionable architects.”³³ a statement which has since been proven largely untrue given research by James Broadbent and Stuart King. Many of the larger country houses and homesteads dating from the 1830s had some form of architectural involvement.³⁴ However, this is not Boyd’s point – it is the assumed lack of design authorship that is important as he went on to describe the survival of this kind of “unassuming idiomatic building” in one of his most poetic descriptions of the rural vernacular:

Out in an ochre paddock where there is no one to impress, where a group of sheds and silos cluster round a square black pool of shade under the iron verandah of a lonely station homestead, here one can still find some of the most genuine construction in all of Australia. It is even accepted as charming in its own way by the modern city worker, because the sun-bleached materials and the sprawling informality of the farmhouse cluster is symbolic of the basic strength and romance of the nation.³⁵

The nobility here of a near heroic rural vernacular is held out to demonstrate national virtue as a counter to the Australian ugliness. Boyd reiterates these same sentiments in *The Walls around Us*, quoting directly from Hardy Wilson

about the virtues of knowing “little of scholarly design”, and significantly makes the statement of the architectural climate of the 1830s that:

There were at least now ten architects practising in Sydney. Some of these were not impressive people, but even so they all produced buildings of simple dignity and repose. As a matter of fact a number of non-architects – untrained builders and owners of houses – designed their own with a style and competence not surpassed by many architects in the next hundred years.³⁶

By which, Boyd means the 1930s (incidentally the same decade in which he designed his first building). This is Boyd’s sub-text for a discussion of the present, the decades after 1939 when Victoria finally moved into line with all other Australian states to protect the title ‘Architect’.³⁷ For while each of Boyd’s four books has an historical component, his main task is to raise readers’ awareness of the present, and in particular, his interest in, for him, the most pressing task: the suburban vernacular.

Suburban vernacular

The primary target of Boyd’s writing between 1947 and 1953 is the everyday house in the suburbs – the suburban vernacular. In both *Victorian Modern* (1947) and *Australia’s Home* (1952), describing the historical development of the suburban vernacular as a type is the strategy to highlight in each case, a parallel narrative running through each book: the development of an apparently enlightened architect-led approach to the design of the single family house. In *Victorian Modern*, this parallel narrative is developed from the rural vernacular to describe the ‘Victorian Type’, but only after Boyd’s sinusoidal curve of ‘Primitives’, ‘Pioneers’, ‘Opulents’, ‘Decadents’, then ‘Prophets’ (Walter Burley Griffin, Robert Haddon, and Harold Desbrowe Annear) and his ‘Section b: The Twentieth Century’, where he gives what is still perhaps one of the most inclusive accounts of modern architecture in Victoria from 1920 to 1947. In *Australia’s Home*, Boyd’s parallel narrative (Part II) describes a national history of domestic architecture that commences with European settlement and ends with images of Harry Seidler’s Rose Seidler House at Wahroonga, NSW (1948-50), Sydney Ancher’s English House, St Ives, NSW (1951) and even a house designed by himself, the Wood House, Balwyn, Victoria (1950).

In *Victorian Modern*, Boyd uses a graphic technique for the first time to define a formal development in Victoria of a typology – ‘The Great Asymmetrical Front’. Seventy years of domestic building, from the Boom period (the 1880s) to the present day, are described by Boyd’s vertical arrangement of five elevational drawings of houses, which Boyd goes on to describe as then being favoured in its most simplified form by the Housing Commission of Victoria:

In its most enlightened form it is neat, attractive and economically expedient in today’s great shortage. It is the house that will be superceded (sic) in Victoria by the Type, and eventually by some indigenous variation of the Type in each other state.³⁸

In short, Boyd is acknowledging the development of a vernacular “developed by the speculative builder who

**Opposite
Top**

Robin Boyd,
*Australia's Home. Its
Origins, Builders and
Occupiers*, (Carlton:
Melbourne University
Press, 1952), RMIT
Design Archives,
Geoffrey Woodfall
Collection. Frontispiece
"The Forgotten House
– nineteenth-century
in New South Wales"
photograph by Max
Dupain. ©2019 Estate
of Robin Boyd, courtesy
Robin Boyd Foundation.
©Max Dupain/Copyright
Agency, 2019

Bottom

Robin Boyd,
*Australia's Home. Its
Origins, Builders and
Occupiers*, (Carlton,
VIC: University Press,
1952), 112, RMIT Design
Archives, Geoffrey
Woodfall Collection.
Illustration "Town –
the suburban villa in the
1940's", photograph by
Visual Aids Department,
University of Melbourne.
© 2019 Estate of Robin
Boyd, courtesy Robin
Boyd Foundation

nursed the all-Australian house throughout its growth" that will be superseded by another (the Victorian Type), which has developed through the involvement of architects, hence by critical intellectual improvement and then, "Only the architects with something personal to say about planning and structure will be able to break their houses free of the chain."³⁹

Boyd's argument which is subtly expressed in *Victorian Modern* is turned up a notch in *Australia's Home*. It becomes elaborated nationally in his eloquent descriptions and drawings of his now eleven 'Major Steps of Stylism': from 'Georgian Primitive' through to the post-World War II 'L-shape'. From the outset, Boyd states in his preface to *Australia's Home* that:

This book, a study of the vernacular in domestic building in Australia, is concerned for the most part with the small houses which have taken up some two-thirds of the building capacity of the nation.⁴⁰

Boyd is careful to note that his book does not deal with the early colonial homesteads of New South Wales and Tasmania already dealt with by others (almost certainly a reference to Hardy Wilson's 1924 book) and while acknowledging that they deserve further study, is happy to state categorically that they "are irrelevant to the present study."⁴¹

The framing of the book as a detailed account of the development of the suburban vernacular is deliberate because a parallel narrative is being developed throughout the book – and that is the assumed superiority of the architect-designed house. While Boyd, with acerbic humour and wit, describes the everyday suburban home and its furnishings with fond vitriol, he is also careful to map a historiographical course of the rise and fall of architectural involvement with the small house, ensuring a positive trajectory for the 'good' (Hardy Wilson; Harold Desbrowe-Annear; Walter Burley Griffin; Roy Grounds; Harry Seidler amongst others). This is achieved through four strategies. The first is the structure of his text, which is divided neatly into Part I, his discourse on style, and Part II, his discourse on all elements of value derived from architectural influences that have trickled down to the suburban vernacular, at times disappearing altogether. Boyd's second strategy is visual, his inclusion of the drawings of the 'Major Steps of Stylism'. The third strategy is Boyd's use of photographic plates, which in themselves map a polemical trajectory. Part I has four plates that begin and end with the rural. Part II had a series of fourteen plates that begins with 'Queen Anne Roofs' and their "false half-timbered gables and frilled ridges" and ends after running through the celebrated Wilson/Desbrowe-Annear/Griffin/Grounds/Dods/Ancher line finishes with Harry Seidler's Rose Seidler House at Wahroonga (1948-50), where Boyd astutely argues a balanced line that:

The robust conflict between this 'Functionalist' work and the more 'Organic' buildings of local revolutionaries could be the greatest stimulus to the future development of architecture.⁴²

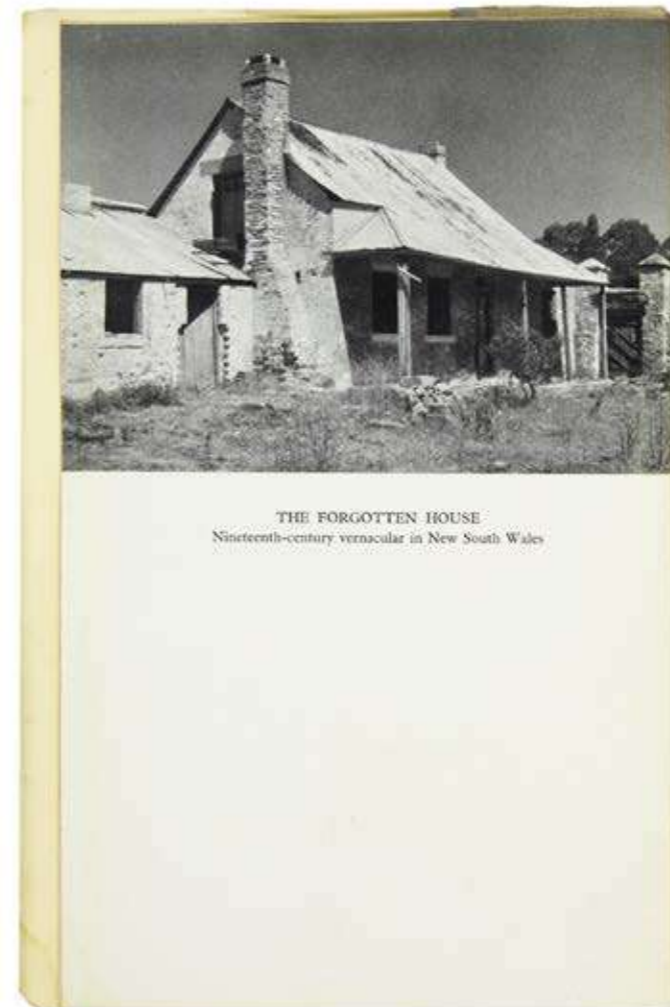
In short, Boyd has not been able to resist inserting an overlay of design polemic into his history of the suburban vernacular. He is not content with dispassionately rendering an account of the suburban vernacular: he wishes to also critique it. One could argue further that his understanding of the vernacular is a selective one. Boyd's history, if one can call it that, is largely a description of the history of the builder's approach to house design; and again this is inherent in the book's sub-title, "Its Origins, Builders and Occupiers".

The fourth strategy is Boyd's cover for the book, where his 'Major Steps of Stylism' form a wallpaper-like cover interrupted only by the book's title and a red square that highlights a terra cotta kangaroo gargoyle on a Federation house roof. The red square is of course a reference to Frank Lloyd Wright's signature red square that was embossed onto all his books and occasionally featured as a glazed tile on his buildings. Is Boyd's aim with this gesture to ask the question: where is the signature of the architect in all of these Australian small houses? Or a private joke for those readers in the know to chuckle with superior glee at the foibles and flaws of the everyday Australian house. It's not clear but it's likely to be both. Remarkably, in all subsequent re-issues of *Australia's Home* – the paper dust-jacket was lost; so too the photographic inserts. In many respects, the complexity of Boyd's argument was diminished in subsequent reprinting.

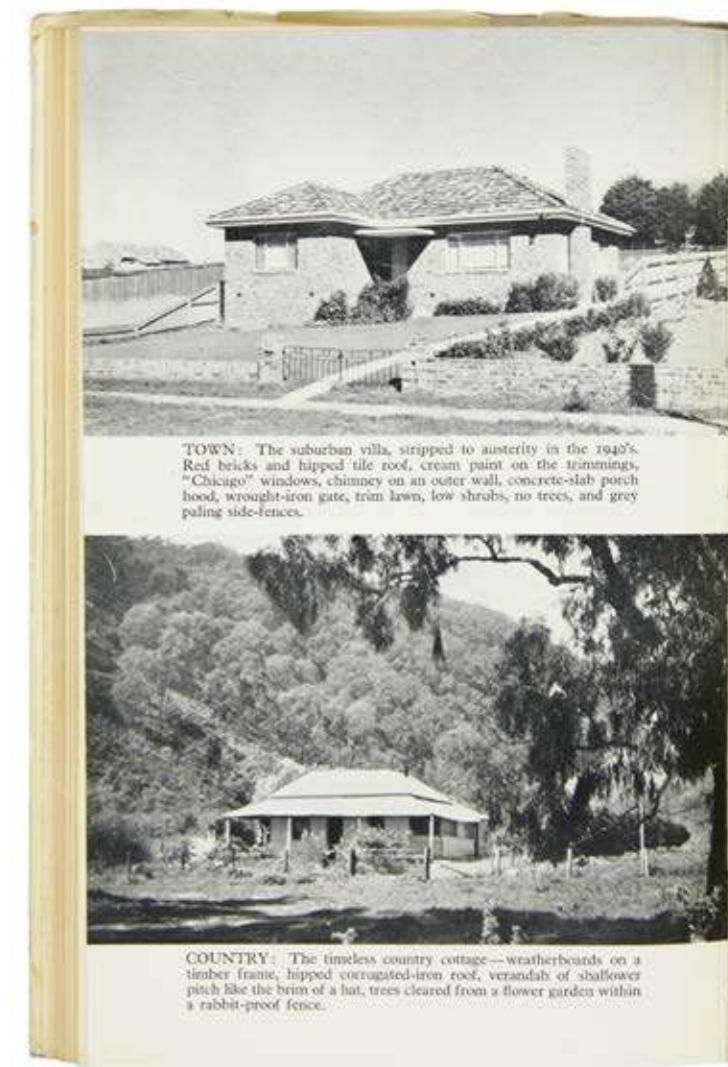
Boyd's writing in *Victorian Modern*, in his Small Homes Service articles in *The Age* (1947-53), and *Australia's Home* is to make an argument for the services of the architect, as a way forward to better domestic design, as a way to steer the vernacular forward to a better position – not to reject it outright. There were a number of reasons for this. The first was to encourage prospective homeowners to make use of the architect in the late 1940s as building recovered after World War II and the suburbs of all Australian cities became the focus of post-war reconstruction. The second was to counter the influence of the so-called 'jerry builder', who might fall back into the excesses of ornament and decoration of the pre-war decades. The third was to make a connection between modernism, the suburban vernacular and ordinary people – that such concepts were not mutually exclusive and that the architecture profession had a role in the production of houses for everyday Australians. Even in *The Australian Ugliness*, Boyd demonstrates respect for the suburban vernacular conceding:

...but when the whole easy-going statement of the conventional Australian villa box with its projecting lounge-room is made in the lazy Aussie drawl of a brickie and his carpenter mate it has its own rough dignity. Without doubt the plainer examples will be held in some reverence as genuine products of their day by future generations of serious architectural students.⁴³

Such a statement confirms a subtlety to Boyd's arguments about the vernacular and architects' involvement with it. He does not reject the everyday suburban house but wants a greater understanding of its genesis and appearance so that changes might be made.



THE FORGOTTEN HOUSE
Nineteenth-century vernacular in New South Wales



TOWN: The suburban villa, stripped to austerity in the 1940's. Red bricks and hipped tile roof, cream paint on the trimmings, "Chicago" windows, chimney on an outer wall, concrete-slab porch hood, wrought-iron gate, trim lawn, low shrubs, no trees, and grey paling side-fences.

COUNTRY: The timeless country cottage—weatherboards on a timber frame, hipped corrugated-iron roof, verandahs of shallower pitch like the brim of a hat, trees cleared from a flower garden within a rabbit-proof fence.

Migrant Vernacular

At the same time, of the migrant vernacular house as it developed in the 1950s and indeed migrants generally, Boyd is silent. What all four of his books reveal is an Anglo-centric reading of the Australia's suburbs and its rural landscapes. To be fair, his first two books were written before the full effects of Australia's post-war migration were felt. Yet by 1955, a million post-war migrants had arrived in Australia and by 1957, the comic novel, *They're a Weird Mob* (1957) by Nino Culotta (written under a pseudonym by John O'Grady) about the experiences of an Italian 'New Australian' had sold 74,000 copies and been reprinted eight times.⁴⁴ *The Australian Ugliness* and *The Walls Around Us* make no mention of this changing social phenomenon.

Boyd reserves his mention of migrants to those qualified as architects, and even then their output is described by flats, notably in *Victorian Modern* by Frederick Romberg, Anatol Kagan and Blumin; in *Australia's Home*, only Harry Seidler and Frederick Romberg gain mention, and in *The Australian Ugliness*, Seidler is joined by Ernest Milston but no others. Boyd appears blinkered to the richness of the residential modernism produced by his émigré colleagues, despite their long-held embrace since the early 1940s by popular journals such as *Australian Home Beautiful* and *Australian Women's Weekly*.⁴⁵

Envoie

When Boyd was writing about the vernacular in the four books under discussion, it must be remembered that globally, few architectural historians between 1947 and 1962 had tackled the question of the vernacular before in book form. Bernard Rudofsky's *Architecture without Architects* (1964) had not been published and Boyd would have been unaware of Italian architect Giuseppe Pagano's writings and exhibitions on vernacular architecture in the 1930s though he would have visited Ludovico Quaroni et al's vernacular-inspired design for the Italian Pavilion in Brussels in 1958. Even closer to home, Boyd seems to have been unaware of work of émigré architects teaching at the University of Melbourne such as Fritz Janeba's research into Anatolian housing in the mid-1950s and Zdenko Strizic's *Svijetla I Sjene (Lights and Shadows)* (1955), a beautiful photo-monograph on Zagreb townscapes. Even Morton Herman's first books on early Australian architects did not appear until 1954 and 1956 and Michael Sharland's *Stones of a Century* appeared in 1952.⁴⁶ Boyd seems to have relied for his basic arguments solely on Hardy Wilson's drawings of and polemical texts on colonial buildings, especially his 1924 book, and *Domestic Architecture in Australia*, the 1919 special issue of *Art in Australia*.

At the same time, it is however very likely that Boyd would have read JM Richards's 1946 book, *The Castles on the Ground*⁴⁷ with its illustrations by John Piper, where as Jessica Kelly has written, Richards attempted to map British vernacular architecture, particularly that of the suburbs "in order for modern architects to understand better the needs of the ordinary man and, in turn, foster a more effective and productive role for architects in developing the culture of twentieth century Britain."⁴⁸ While there is no record of Boyd owning the book, the parallel is strong, especially with

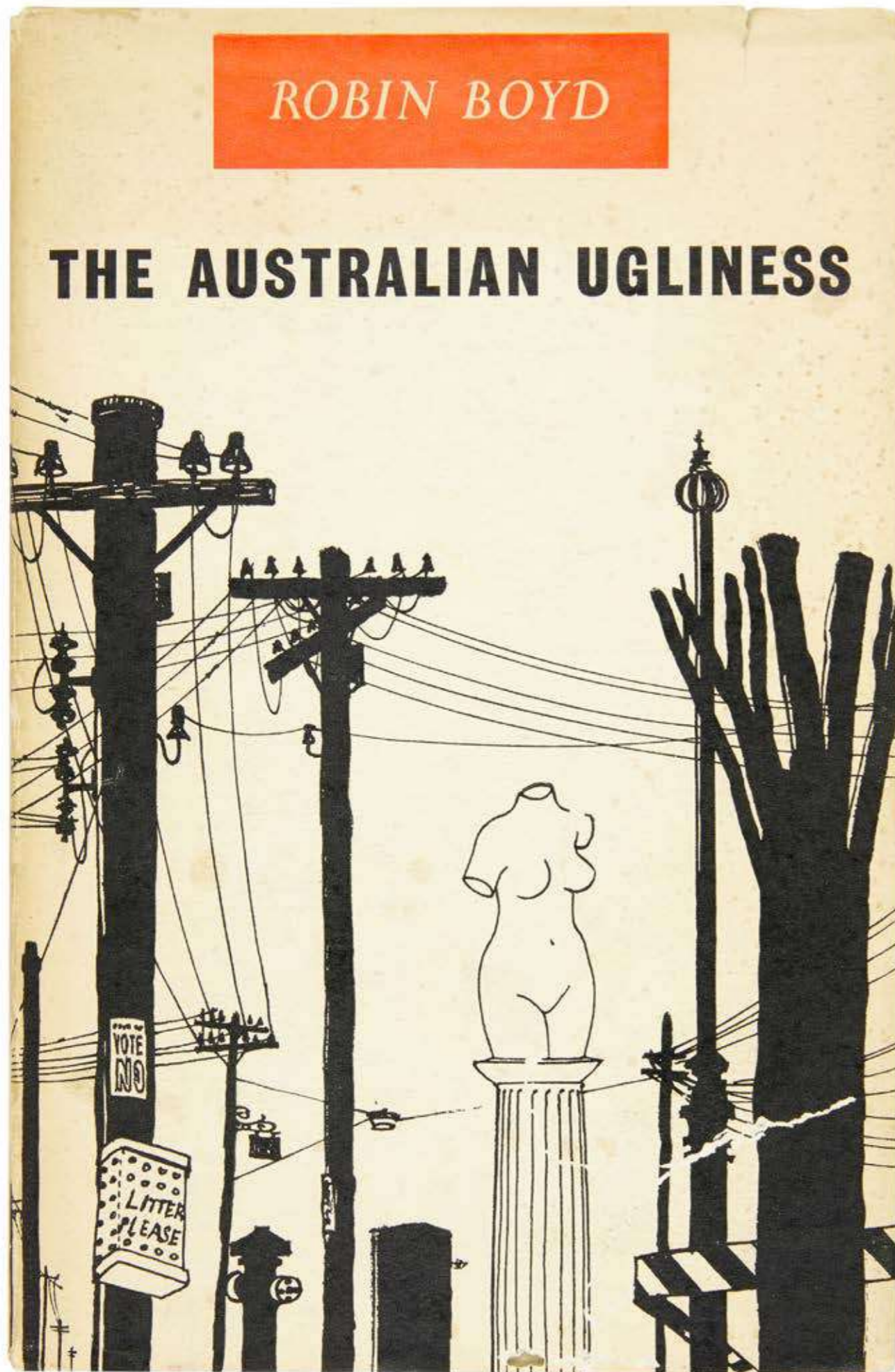
Australia's Home. Except that Boyd adds the humour of Osbert Lancaster with his own drawings and playful graphic design, the wit of John Betjeman, and in both *Victorian Modern* and *Australia's Home*, his direct textual, pictorial and photographic advice as an architect as to where the design direction of domestic architecture might head. In short, Boyd appears to mirror the intention of Richards's message about an architect's responsibility to the everyday but wants to go further and suggest actual solutions, i.e. the Victorian Type in *Victorian Modern*, and through texts and photographic plates in Part II of *Australia's Home*.

It is relatively straightforward to criticize Boyd for his lack of breadth in describing the various vernacular architectures of Australia from today's standpoint. However, there is little doubt about the daring ambition of his project. That Boyd succeeded in drawing public and professional awareness to the look and development of the suburban vernacular house is proven by the longevity of *Australia's Home* and its constant reprinting over more than five decades, and the relative constancy of his argument before in *Victorian Modern* and after in *The Australian Ugliness* and *The Walls Around Us*. Other authors have attempted to do so but without the same effect or élan.⁴⁹

Yet – given the advent of Pop and postmodern inclusion – one needs to be wary of Boyd's confident historic sweeps, especially in *Australia's Home*. There, the final words to the preface to the 1952 edition, that "This is the story of a material triumph and an aesthetic calamity,"⁵⁰ openly reveal the not-so subtle sub-text that runs through the four texts discussed here. That he ignored the Indigenous vernacular, the rural vernacular and the migrant vernacular was no accident. Boyd was championing the role of the architect in a decade (the 1950s) when the suburban vernacular was, in many respects, up for grabs in terms of design leadership in the nation's booming postwar suburban expansion. The legacy of Boyd's persuasive writing was three-fold: first, architects in the 1960s became actively involved in project home building largely it has to be said at the invitation of builders such as Pettit & Sevitt and Merchant Builders and a new 'designed' suburban vernacular (of which Boyd approved and contributed⁵¹) was offered to a discerning home-buying public – but only to those who could afford it. Second, the rural vernacular, used as a polemical prop in each Boyd text, would be taken up by other architects (as well as Boyd but in buildings not writing⁵²) in the 1960s as an aesthetic, theoretical and documentary cause as the rise of architectural conservation, heritage and architectural history, and a local turn to the 'as found' encouraged the replaying of old myths of a national identity based on settlement of the land. Thirdly and finally, this phenomenon continued to engender amongst most of the architectural profession, a form of visual, social and historic amnesia to issues of the Indigenous and the migrant vernacular well into the 1970s. Only now, nearly fifty years after Boyd's death, is a more complete picture being drawn.

Endnotes

- Miles Lewis, *Victorian Primitive*, (Carlton, Vic: Greenhouse Publications, 1977).
- Encyclopedia of vernacular architecture of the world*, ed. Paul Oliver, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), ii.
- Philip Cox and JM Freeland, *Rude timber buildings in Australia*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969).
- Paul Memmott, *Gunya, goondie + wurley: The Aboriginal architecture of Australia*, (St. Lucia, QLD: University of Queensland Press, 2007).
- Mirjana Lozanovska, *Migrant housing: architecture, dwelling, migration*, (London: Routledge, 2019).
- Walter Bunning, *Homes in the Sun*, (Sydney: WJ Nesbit, 1945), 9.
- Robin Boyd, *Victorian Modern: one hundred and eleven years of modern architecture in Victoria*, (Melbourne: Architectural Students' Society of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects, 1947), 3.
- Boyd, *Victorian Modern*, 38.
- Robin Boyd, *Australia's Home, its Origins Builders and Occupiers* (Carlton, VIC: Melbourne University Press, 1952), 123.
- Boyd, *Australia's Home*, 123.
- Boyd, *Australia's Home*, 123.
- Boyd, *Australia's Home*, 123.
- Boyd, *Australia's Home*, 123.
- Robin Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness*, (Melbourne: FW Cheshire, 1960), 90 and 100.
- Robin Boyd, *The Walls Around Us: The story of Australian architecture / told and illustrated for young readers by Robin Boyd*, (Melbourne: Cheshire for the Children's Library Guild of Australia, 1962), 1.
- Boyd, *The Walls Around Us*, 1-2.
- Boyd, *The Walls Around Us*, 2.
- Boyd, *The Walls Around Us*, 2.
- Boyd, *The Walls Around Us*, 2.
- The first 200 years*, catalogue for the exhibition presented by the Industrial Design Council of Australia, Australia Square, (Sydney, New South Wales, May 1968).
- There is a common misconception that the 1967 referendum gave Australian Aboriginal people citizenship and the right to vote. This is not the case. Across the nation, the ability to vote had differed dramatically from state to state since the late 1940s. It was only in 1983 that the Commonwealth Electoral Act 1983 made voting compulsory for all Australians, including Aboriginal people. Prior to that date, it had been optional for Aboriginal people since 1962, and even after the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1949*, which gave Aborigines the right to vote in Federal elections, the right was conditional on being able to vote in state elections and in a state such as Queensland, Aboriginal people were disqualified altogether.
- See W.E.H. Stanner, "The Boyer Lectures: After the Dreaming (1968)", in W.E.H. Stanner, *The Dreaming and Other Essays*, (Collingwood, VIC: Black Inc Agenda, 2010), 172-224. The phrase "cult of disremembering", follows perhaps Stanner's most damning sentence: "What may well have begun as a simple forgetting of other possible views turned into habit and over time into something like a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale." See Stanner, 'The Great Australian Silence', 189.
- Harriet Edquist, 'William H. Nankivell Collection', *RMIT Design Archives Journal*, (2011): 10. For contemporary notice of the AAL building, see 'Structural usage of timber around Melbourne – recreational', *Timber Trends*, (July-August 1966): 3.
- Boyd, *Victorian Modern*, 60.
- Boyd, *Victorian Modern*, 60.
- Boyd, *Victorian Modern*, 66.
- Boyd, *Victorian Modern*, 69. The towns cited included: Swan Hill, Seymour, Wangaratta, Ballarat, Maffra, Horsham, Ringwood (all planned by Frank Heath); Shepparton (Stephenson & Turner); Cobram (Bates, Smart & McCutcheon); and Geelong (Leith & Bartlett; Buchan, Laird & Buchan).
- Boyd, *Australia's Home*, 1952, 112. Caption to photographic plate opposite page 113.
- Gene Bawden, 'A Whiter Shade of Beige: The Sanitizing of the Australian Domestic Interior', *Design Principles and Practices*, 4: 2 (2010), 205-16.
- Robin Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness*, 130.
- Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness*, 131.
- Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness*, 131. Roseneath (c.1835) survives today as Roseneath Cottage at 40-42 O'Connell Street, Parramatta. It is a fine and rare example of an Anglo-Indian brick bungalow, with its hipped roof falling unbroken over an encircling verandah on three sides supported on slim turned timber columns and flagged with sandstone.
- Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness*, 132.
- James Broadbent, *The Australian colonial house: architecture and society in New South Wales, 1788-1842*, (Sydney: Hordern House, in association with the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, 1997) and Stuart King, 'Scottish networks and their buildings in Van Diemen's Land and Tasmania', *ABE Journal (Architecture Beyond Europe)*, 2019): 14-15, see <http://journals.openedition.org/abe/5887>.
- Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness*, 135.
- Boyd, *The Walls Around Us*, 11.
- Victoria was the last of the Australian states to legally protect the term 'architect' in 1939. It had protected the title 'registered architect' from 1922 but unlike other states lagged in successfully achieving protection for the single term 'architect'. See Julie Willis, 'Registration of Architects', in *The Encyclopedia of Australian Architecture*, eds. Philip Goad and Julie Willis, (Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 590.
- Boyd, *Victorian Modern*, 68.
- Boyd, *Victorian Modern*, 68.
- Robin Boyd, *Australia's Home*, i.
- Boyd, *Australia's Home*, i.
- Boyd, *Australia's Home*, 256, caption facing page 257.
- Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness*, 135.
- Nino Culotta (John O'Grady), *They're A Weird Mob: a novel*, (Sydney: Ure Smith, 1957).
- Harriet Edquist, 'Vienna Abroad: Viennese interior design in Australia, 1940-1949', *RMIT Design Archives Journal*, 9: 1 (2019): 6-35.
- Morton Herman, *The Early Australian Architects and Their Work*, (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1954) and *The Architecture of Victorian Sydney*, (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1956); Michael Sharland, *Stones of a Century*, (Hobart: Oldham, Beddome and Meredith, 1952).
- JM Richards, *The Castles on the Ground*, (London: Architectural Press, 1946).
- Jessica Kelly, JM Richards, Modernism and the Vernacular in British Architecture', *Architectural History*, 58 (2015): 230.
- Patrick Troy's edited volume, *A History of European Housing in Australia* (2000), for example, has been effectively critiqued in this regard. See Mirjana Lozanovska, 'Ambivalence and Neo-Colonial Historiography', in *Distance Looks Back, Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand*, 36, (Sydney, 2019), forthcoming.
- Boyd, *Australia's Home*, ii.
- For example, Boyd's project house designs for Apple Tree Hill, Glen Waverley, 1965.
- For example, Romberg & Boyd's unbuilt designs for the Mitchelton Winery, Nagambie, Victoria, 1969-71.



Robin Boyd's *The Australian Ugliness*, ugliness, and liberal education

John Macarthur

Robin Boyd's graphic style in *The Australian Ugliness* owes much to the British journal *The Architectural Review* (AR) and in particular to Osbert Lancaster and Gordon Cullen in their critical and frequently humorous depictions of the vernacular built environment and the fancies of popular taste.¹ On this basis it is reasonable to assume that Boyd's account of ugliness also has sources in the AR's discussion of architecture and ugliness, which Boyd references. But this is not the case; or, rather, there is an ambiguity here.

Boyd writes with a quite patrician disdain for popular misunderstandings and ignorance of architecture, and this is at odds with a certain condescending fondness for the foolishness of bad building that we see in his drawings, which are closer to the AR. Boyd's ambivalent ugliness shares with the AR a strategy of deploying ugliness to ask what role architectural expertise ought to have in a liberal society where all have a right to express their taste. A circuitous identification of Boyd's sources might sound a project worth forgetting, but I argue that Boyd's confusion, or the confusion around ugliness in Boyd's text, has something to tell us about the relation of architecture and liberal concepts of civic education in the period.

For Boyd ugliness occurs when buildings and urban environments are not governed by ideas. The ideas that ought to govern and those that should not are part of Boyd's argument, but ugliness primarily lies not in choosing the wrong ideas, but rather in not realising that they are required at all – in a lack of ambition of the maker to govern the work and the individual's failure to understand that aesthetic pleasures mean nothing without a consequent judgment. Boyd's thinking on these matters is classic formalism. He is in that broad tradition that follows from Immanuel Kant's concept of aesthetic ideas, and the latter's distinction of aesthetic judgment from mere pleasure. It is perhaps a strange comparison but Boyd is not a world away from his contemporary Theodor Adorno, another arch modernist, sharp-tongued critic of popular culture, who thought that an artwork constituted itself through a non-conceptual rationality, a reasoned relation of its parts that could not be fixed in a logical concept.

What then is particular to the Australian ugliness? This is Boyd's famous "featurism" or valuing features over essential forms and the aesthetic rationality that ought to govern them. Featurism is an internationally observable aesthetical and ethical failing, but one that Boyd claims to reach an apogee in the Australia of the 1950s in its degree, and also in the particularly infuriating national idiom in which the crime of featurism is perpetrated. Now we could imagine different manners of featurism that result from an obsequious historicism, or a simple-minded *horror vacui*,

but Australian featurism is particularly repulsive because it is cheerful, hygienic and taken to signify modernity when it is its exact opposite. The idiom of Australian featurism plays out in a sequence of attractive novelty of form, materials and ornaments, each making their own plea for attention, one after the other, feature columns, supporting feature porches, with plasticised silky-oak front door alongside sand blasted koala figures on internal glass partitions⁴ and with no expectation of an aesthetic unity. These crimes are exacerbated by a certain kind of blindness in a will not to see non-features, particularly the overhead wiring of the streets and the prevalence of external pipes and vents on building facades. The two errors compound as Boyd says when a non-feature like a public toilet, is thought to require a painting scheme or other embellishment on account of its unsightliness, a strategy that makes it into a feature.

Boyd's critique of popular taste in building sits over historical and theoretical accounts of architecture. The history is a double one, first, a set of remarks about Australian architecture and the travails of building through the Georgian (good) and neo-Gothic eclectic (bad); and second more complicated views on the history of modernist architecture – with remarks on the now realised faults of the "old modernists" and the necessity for the "new modernists" like Boyd himself, to think more clearly and try harder. The theoretical arguments are largely also historical running through claims to ethical and aesthetic foundations for architecture from Vitruvius to Sir (sic) Geoffrey Scott to Joseph Hudnut. It is in these sections that ugliness is at stake and where Boyd comes unstuck. But the core argument is quite clear, it is a refreshed account of a distinction of architecture from building that Boyd puts in an original form as an argument to eliminate the "in-between building". Boyd supposes that modernisation and architectural modernism show a path for industrialised providers of functionalist "space-enclosure" where architecture in the full sense is not required. A consequence of this victory of architectural functionalism from the first half of the century is that the new modernists of the second half need to understand that their role is poetic and expressive of cultural aspirations. It is the middle that

Opposite
Robin Boyd,
The Australian Ugliness,
(Melbourne: FW.
Cheshire, 1960),
RMIT Design Archives,
Roy Simpson Collection.
Cover illustration by
Robin Boyd.
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Boyd, Courtesy Robin
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Continued

Opposite

Robin Boyd,
The Australian Ugliness,
(Melbourne: FW
Cheshire, 1960),
RMIT Design Archives,
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Cover illustration by
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is the problem, as Boyd writes: "The solution then is to recognise that there is an appropriate time and place for both the technology of space-enclosure and the architecture of expression, and to work to eliminate the neuter type: neither scientific nor artistic".⁵ It is these in-between buildings made by neutered architects where featurism runs amuck and ugliness results.

Having characterised Boyd's approach to ugliness let me now describe its commonalities and differences with the approach of the *AR*.⁶ Boyd is straight-forward in acknowledging that his discussion of ugliness draws on the *AR*'s issue "Man Made America" of 1950 and the 1955 campaign "Outrage" edited by Ian Nairn.⁷ The June 1955 issue, which was then released as a book, was conceived by Nairn as a transect across England from Southampton to Carlisle, where in the manner of a tourist of the anti-picturesque Nairn photographed and described in his scarring prose various outrages against taste and even simple logic in building. But as Nairn writes twenty years later "the geezer who wrote almost all of it – a lot of the introduction was the proof spirit of H. de C. Hastings..."⁸ Hubert de Cronin Hastings was the owner and editor of the *AR* who over decades had co-opted numerous architects and intellectuals to develop variations on his idea of a picturesque revival. The earliest outing of the idea flew under the title of "Exterior Furnishing, or Sharawaggi", it had its longest run as "Townscape", but the same agenda underlay "Outrage", "Counter-attack", "Civilia" and "Collage City". Early writers from the 1940s included Nikolaus Pevsner, John Betjeman, Jim Richards, and John Piper, by the 1970s Peter Rayner Banham and Colin Rowe, and in the middle, Gordon Cullen, Kenneth Brown and Ian Nairn (and a one-off Townscape essay by Robert Venturi).

Hastings was a life-long nemesis to suburbia, which *Outrage* calls "subtopia", and which, in a later campaign, Hastings calls "semi-detsia". In the 1950 *Outrage* issue Hastings writes that if subtopia is allowed to continue to the end of the century it will cause Great Britain to: "consist of isolated oases of preserved monuments in a desert of wire, concrete roads, cosy plots and bungalows. There will be no real distinction between town and country. Both will consist of a limbo of shacks, bogus rusticities, wire and aerodromes set in some fir-poled fields..."⁹ The similarity in Hastings and Boyd's targets and their sarcasm and taste for hyperbole is made the more striking by the debts that Boyd's illustrations owe to Gordon Cullen's illustration to "Subtopia", with posts and cables, road signage and advertising framing a mutilated tree. But beneath these graphic and textual stylistic similarities there are important differences.

Hastings main concern was not the neutered middle between plain scientific building and expressive architectural culture, but rather that flaccid zone between town and country. Subtopia might be ugly, but this is not, in the first place because of failings of taste, but rather because of not distinguishing town and country and the kinds of landscapes and townscape that they ought to be. In fact, the *AR* and Townscape was founded on a belief in compromise and a middle hybrid condition between

advanced architecture and popular taste, a non-suburban urban condition where ugliness could be a virtue. Hastings and his collaborators were arch modernists in building forms but deeply opposed modernist urban planning for two reasons. First, they were kinds of preservationists and thought old buildings should be kept for their historical cultural value no matter how obsolete they might be technically, aesthetically and socially, and thus they were opposed to the *tabula rasa* approach of the *Ville Radieuse* and its cousins. Secondly, Pevsner argued that modernist planning was actually not modern, but Baroque on account of its ruling geometries. He claimed that urban design was yet to learn the principles of site specificity and functionally derived asymmetry, that modern building had achieved.

"Exterior Furnishing, or Sharawaggi" an article by The Editor (Hastings) of 1944 foreshadows the Townscape campaigns that follow in a manner that makes the differences with Boyd clear. Hastings proposes that urban design be thought of much as a sensible person would furnish their home, that is eclectically:

The fear of one's modern cupboard clashing with the Victorian atmosphere of a room, or one's Victorian chandelier looking out of place in an Aalto environment is wholly unjustified. Even more undesirable is the fear that any object, in itself not up to a discriminating contemporary aesthetic standard, would be a blot on a whole interior. The aesthetic qualities of the individual items are quite irrelevant. Let them be ugly, let them be incongruous. What matters alone is the unity and congruity of the pattern. A frankly vulgar little bronze poodle on an Italian marble pedestal might even hold a place of honour on the mantle shelf, either because of its value as an accent in a picturesque whole, or ... because of some equally legitimate sentimental value.¹⁰

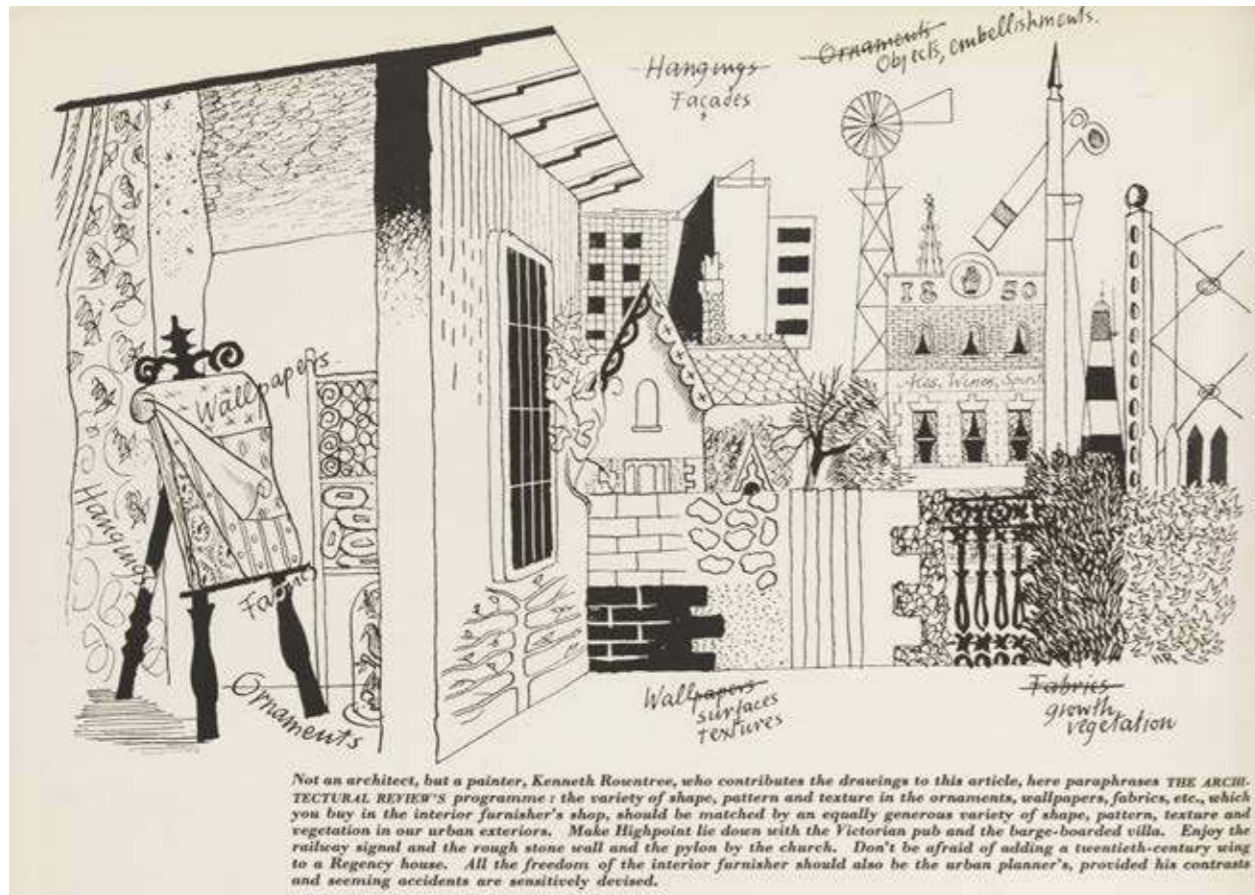
It is the unlikelihood of the vulgar bronze poodle that brings the room together; visual unity triumphing over taste. Hastings explains the origins of this anti-aesthetic with reference to the Picturesque theorist Uvedale Price:

... perhaps the first man in history to reveal that an object may be "ugly" in itself and yet in a suitable context may have aesthetic possibilities. Payne Knight, it will be remembered, brought up the carcass of an ox as an instance of a revolting object which could provoke painterly delight ... the eighteenth-century intelligentsia cut right across the centuries linking Salvator Rosa with Salvador Dali.¹¹

Ugliness for Hastings, in a meme going back to Aristotle, and rejigged in the Picturesque and more widely in Romanticism was a name for things empirically unlikeable that could be appropriated and made into Art. As the British Hegelian philosopher Bernard Bosanquet argued early in the century, there was no true ugliness, just things that were more difficult to appropriate aesthetically. Hastings invocation of the name of Dali shows how influenced the early Townscape was by Surrealism, partly through the involvement of the painter Paul Nash in the 1930s. We can sharpen the contrast with Boyd further by looking at the illustration commissioned for "Exterior



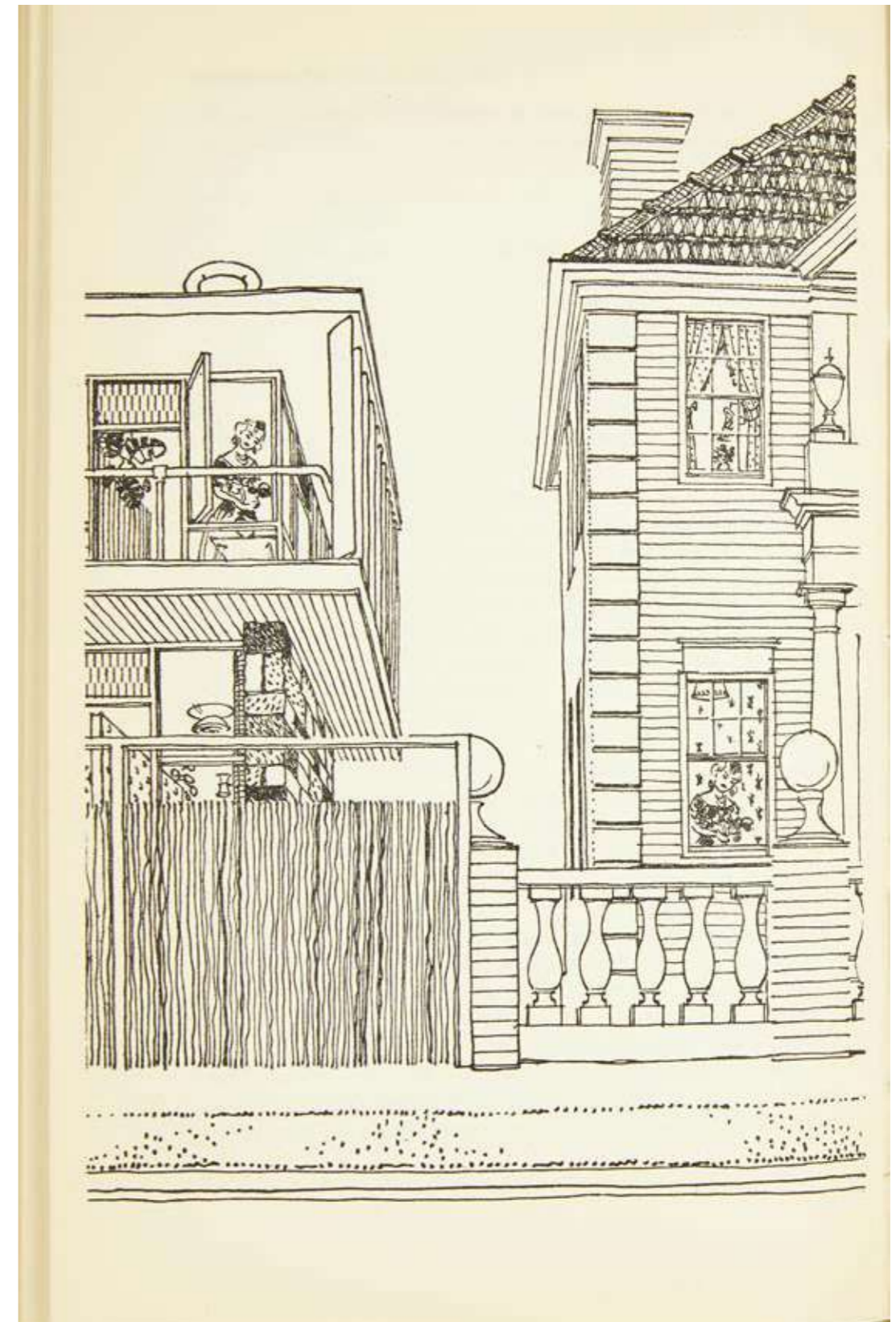
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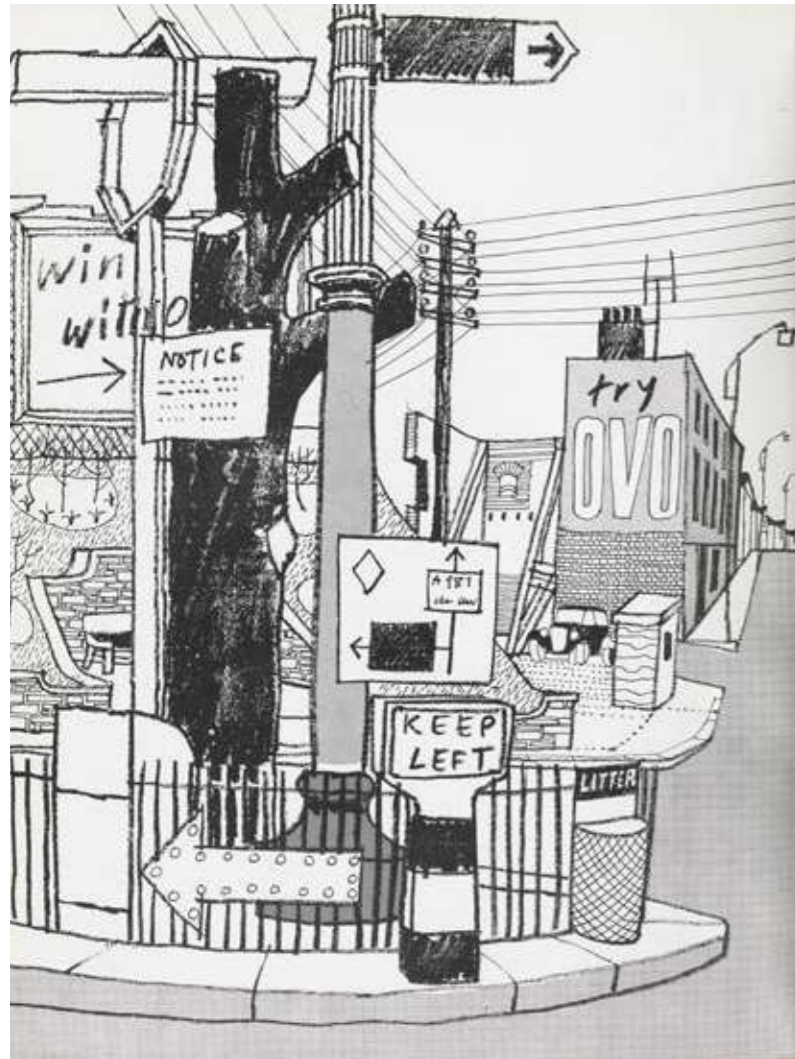
Not an architect, but a painter, Kenneth Rowntree, who contributes the drawings to this article, here paraphrases THE ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW'S programme: the variety of shape, pattern and texture in the ornaments, wallpapers, fabrics, etc., which you buy in the interior furnisher's shop, should be matched by an equally generous variety of shape, pattern, texture and vegetation in our urban exteriors. Make Highpoint lie down with the Victorian pub and the barge-boarded villa. Enjoy the railway signal and the rough stone wall and the pylon by the church. Don't be afraid of adding a twentieth-century wing to a Regency house. All the freedom of the interior furnisher should also be the urban planner's, provided his contrasts and seeming accidents are sensitively devised.

Top
Editor, The "Exterior
Furnishing or Sharawaggi:
The Art of Making
Urban Landscape."
The Architectural Review 95
(January 1944): 2-8; 6,
illustrated by Kenneth
Rowntree, courtesy
State Library of Victoria

Opposite
Robin Boyd,
The Australian Ugliness,
(Melbourne: FW.
Cheshire, 1960), 174,
Roy Simpson Collection,
RMIT Design Archives.
Illustration by Robin
Boyd, ©2019 Estate of
Robin Boyd, courtesy
Robin Boyd Foundation



Continued



Top
The Editor "Subtopia,"
The Architectural Review
117, no. 702 (1955): 364-71:
71. Illustration by Gordon
Cullen, courtesy State
Library of Victoria

Furnishing" from the painter Kenneth Rowntree which has many similarities with Cullen and Boyd's later cartoon like explanations for architectural concepts. Boyd's drawing of a feature-full modern house neighbouring a polite Georgian one is whimsical but it is intended, as we know from the text, to show incongruity as a fault.¹² Rowntree's drawing is after the "frankly vulgar bronze poodle" effect in contrasting Tudorbethan cottages and Victorian signage with modernist facades that are quite like those Boyd mocked. These graphic similarities raise a question of how many architect readers of *The Australian Ugliness* assimilated it to the much more nuanced line of the most popular journal of the day, the *AR*. Boyd's drawings are not a world away from his friend Barry Humphries' acerbic, scatological, but fondly tragic satires on suburban life and characters, and they are certainly closer to the difficult beauty of the *AR*'s ugliness, than they are to what Boyd argues in the text of the book.

There was a politics behind Hastings' architectural theories which was an idiosyncratic version of liberalism. Like many of the British intellectuals in the period when post-war reconstruction shifted into the Cold War, Hastings was opposed to utopian thinking that could lead to Stalinism, and equally aware of the majoritarian tendencies of democracies that saw them become prey to fascist popularism. For Hastings rejecting technocracy and social-engineering meant rejecting utopian modernism while staving off the tyranny of the majority meant having individual rights that were beyond the reach of government. Lack of agreement about taste in building was symptomatic of individual liberty, while a comfortable compromise at an urban level demonstrated a functioning civil settlement. Hastings favoured heavy Brutalism and had no more respect for flim-flam decorative modernism than Boyd, but Hastings would accept modernist featurism alongside meretricious historicism and vernacular mis-appropriations of style, on the grounds that buildings of very varied architectural quality could be composed by an architectural eye at an urban level. If we think that architecture is a part of this balance of governance and freedom (and that it is a difficult question), then Boyd's attack on the "in-between" neuter realm of building, his belief that the growth of architectural expertise will take us to an anonymous mass of generic space enclosures leaving cultural expression in the hands of a few elect architects, looks very illiberal indeed.

Boyd seems to understand the thrust of the *AR*'s campaign in the last page of the book where he concludes his discussion of the problems in architectural theory of beauty which he defines as the pursuit of pleasingness. He writes: "A capacity to appreciate the unbeautiful is a quality which no Featurist would envy and few would be interested in cultivating; yet this is the key to depth in appreciation of architecture..."¹³ And he is of course correct, as the Western aesthetic tradition whispered to him and everyone else of an artistic disposition through all the channels of bourgeois education, schools, galleries, books and the improving broadcasts of the ABC – beauty must be distinguished from simple pleasing, and a simple demonstration of this truth is to see beauty in the aesthetic appropriation of things that are empirically ugly. But Boyd cannot say that the

"unbeautiful" is ugliness, nor that ugliness is just a very difficult beauty, or his wider argument would fall away. Boyd comes closer to finding this point of balance but without exactly settling the matter when he assesses the New Brutalism as a proper attack on classical doctrines of beauty that lead the simple minded to featurism, but a concept so rebarbative that it had failed to reform architectural culture.¹⁴ In 1967 in an article length review of Peter Rayner Banham's *The New Brutalism, ethic or aesthetic?* Boyd tries to cut the difference between the Smithson's Economist Building and Banham's dismissal of it as "aesthetic".¹⁵ For Boyd the Economist Building is a practical compromise of Brutalist "basic building" with its chichi environment in St James. If an architectural movement like New Brutalism could "lead the world away from seductive aesthetic pleasures to the pure intelligence of building" then, Boyd claims there would be room for the Smithson's limestone clad elegance and Banham's *autre* architecture.¹⁶

A final point to make lies observing that *The Australian Ugliness*, like the *AR*'s campaigns apparently address a wide public, but is really written for architects. It is as if Boyd and Hastings are looking over the shoulder of the profession and showing ways to explain things to the public that might be effective. Thus, my picking apart the similarities and differences in arguments between architects, risks losing the bigger picture by leaving out the interlocutor that they both sought, but did not quite have, the public. *The Australian Ugliness* like Boyd's other books addressing a popular audience and his Boyer Lectures on ABC Radio in 1967 entitled *Artificial Australia* follow the liberal philosophy of the ABC and BBC in assuming that an education in literature, the visual and arts and architecture supported by public broadcasting, is a part of citizen formation – that the public, given the basic means to argue and disagree politely about the form of buildings, will better prepare themselves to think on economic and international affairs.¹⁷ From this wider viewpoint the difference between Hastings and Boyd starts to close, a play with ugliness or its rejection, Hastings condescension and Boyd's disdain for popular taste in building, are much the same. We can read Boyd's drawings as charming and affectionate satires at odds with the propositions in his text. But this is not perhaps such a contradiction, nor in the end, does it matter if Hastings condescension toward popular taste in building is more liberal than Boyd's desire to euthanise the "neuter". These are moot points in a public debate that architectural theorists believe that buildings can and ought to provoke, and a claim that thinking about architecture is a necessity for a liberal society.

Endnotes

- 1 Robin Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness* (Melbourne: FW. Cheshire, 1960).
- 2 Immanuel Kant and Paul Guyer, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (Cambridge UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
- 3 Theodor W Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
- 4 Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness*, 28
- 5 Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness*, 118
- 6 I have written extensively on the relation of the *Architectural Review*'s Townscape and the picturesque alongside my colleague Mathew Aitchison see: John Macarthur, *The Picturesque: Architecture, Disgust and Other Irregularities* (London, New York: Routledge, 2007). John Macarthur, "Townscape, Anti-Scrape and Surrealism: Paul Nash and John Piper in the *Architectural Review*," *The Journal of Architecture* 14, no. 3 (2009): 387-406; Mathew Aitchison and John Macarthur, "Pevsner's Townscape," *Visual Planning and the Picturesque*, ed Nikolaus Pevsner and Mathew Aitchison, (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute 2010): 1-43; John Macarthur, "The Revenge of the Picturesque", *Redux*, *Journal of Architecture* 17, no. 5 (2012): 643-53; John Macarthur and Mathew Aitchison, "Oxford Versus the Bath Road: Empiricism and Romanticism in the *Architectural Review*'s Picturesque Revival," *Journal of Architecture* 17 no 1 (2012): 51-68; Mathew Aitchison, "Visual Planning and Exterior Furnishing: A Critical History of the Early Townscape Movement, 1930 to 1949," (PhD Thesis, The University of Queensland, 2008); Mathew Aitchison, "Who's Afraid of Ivor De Wolfe?" *AA Files* 62 (2011): 34-39. Mathew Aitchison, "Townscape: Scope, Scale and Extent," *Journal of Architecture* 17, no. 5 (2012): 621-42.
- 7 Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness*, 26-7. "Man Made America", *The Architectural Review*, 108, no. 648 (December, 1950): 337-416. Ian Nairn, *Outrage* (London, Architectural Press, 1955). The book combined articles published in *The Architectural Review*, 117, no. 702 (June, 1955): 364-460.
- 8 Ian Nairn, "Outrage 20 Years After," *The Architectural Review*, 158 no. 946 (1975): 328-37.
- 9 The Editor, "Subtopia," *The Architectural Review* 117, no. 702 (1955): 335, 364-71.
- 10 The Editor, "Exterior Furnishing or Sharawaggi: The Art of Making Urban Landscape," *The Architectural Review*, 95 (January 1944): 2-8.
- 11 The Editor, "Exterior Furnishing": 9.
- 12 Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness*, 174
- 13 Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness*, 224
- 14 Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness*, 196-7
- 15 Robin Boyd, "The Sad End of the New Brutalism," *The Architectural Review* (Archive: 1896-2005) 142, no. 845 (1967). On Boyd's attitude to Brutalism and its wider role in Australian architecture see Philip Goad, "Bringing It All Home: Robin Boyd and Australia's Embrace of Brutalism, 1955-71," *Fabrications* 25, no. 2 (2015): 176-213.
- 16 Boyd, "The Sad End", 11
- 17 On the significant role architecture played in the early BBC see Shundana Yusuf, *Broadcasting Buildings: Architecture on the Wireless, 1927-1945* (The MIT Press, 2014). On radio and civics see David Goodman, "A Transnational History of Radio Listening Groups I: the United Kingdom and United States," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 36, no. 3 (2016): 436-65; David Goodman "A Transnational History of Radio Listening Groups II: Canada, Australia and the World," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 36, no. 4 (2016): 627-48.



PEER
REVIEWED
ESSAY

Robin Boyd: The Wizard of Oz

Christine Phillips and Peter Raisbeck

Robin Boyd's creative work reverberated across a range of platforms from interiors, architecture, garden design, writing, illustration and public broadcasting. Given this, it is easy to see Boyd as a cultural producer who could create outputs in different media channels. However, underlying this was a bigger agenda: one driven by a desire to explore how spaces were experienced along with the desire to communicate to a broad audience.

While traditional forms of media such as Boyd's well-known television broadcasts, newspaper columns and best-selling books were one way to achieve this, lesser known is Boyd's explorations into the nexus between architectural space, sound theatre and the new media technologies of the 1960s. Boyd's theoretical flair with a range of multimedia design experiments is yet to receive the analysis it deserves, yet this analysis is critical in contributing to an alternate view of established Anglo-centric accounts of Australia's history. At Expo '67 in Montreal, Canada, Boyd's 'Sound Chairs' embedded pre-recorded tape recordings to create a sonic narrative of Australian identity. At Expo '70 in Osaka, Japan, Boyd's 'Space Tube' design combined a range of media and spatial apparatuses to create an immersive experience of Australian life. In examining Boyd's Expo '67 and Expo '70 designs, it will be ascertained how and to what degree Boyd sought to evoke altered states.

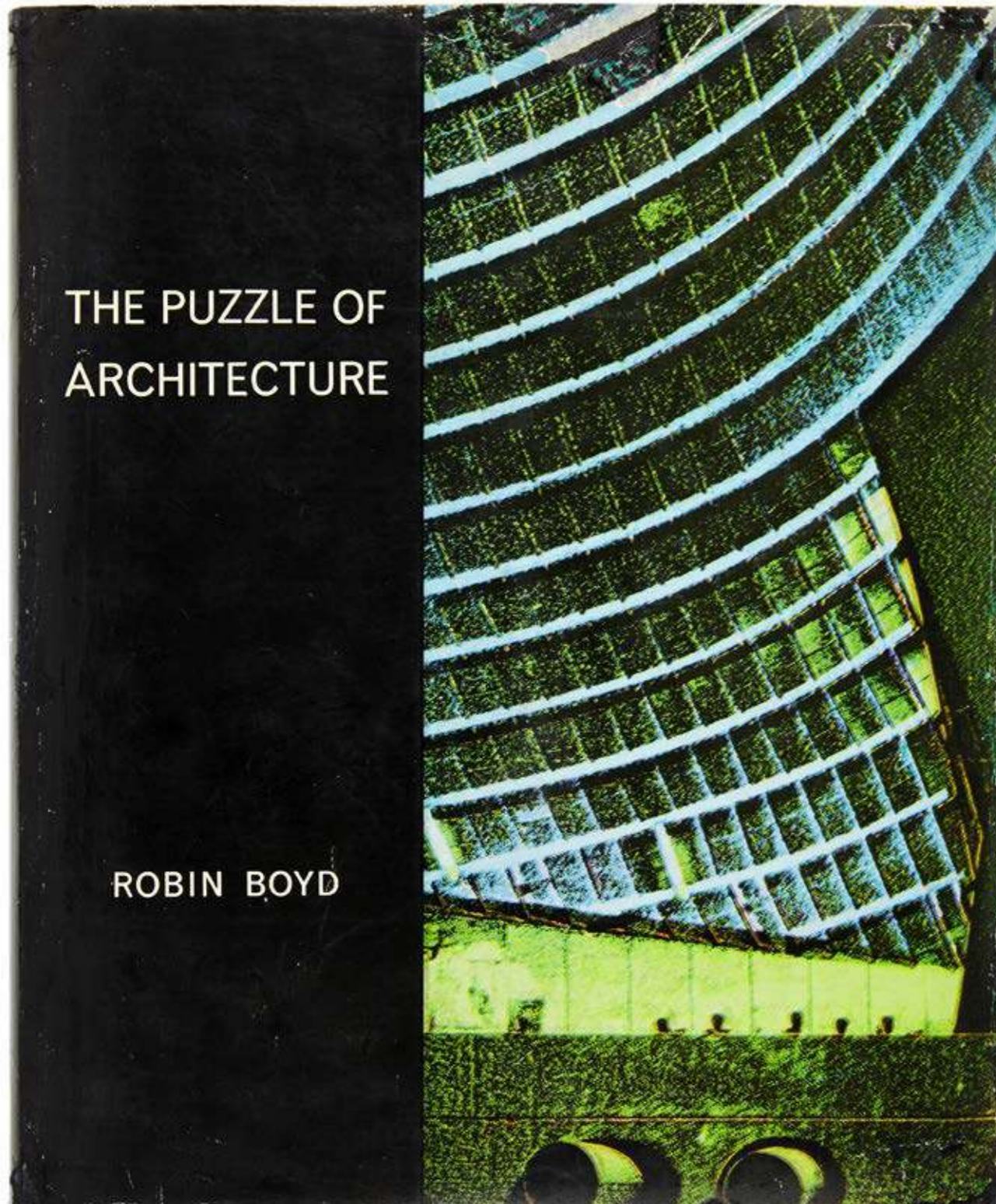
Boyd's extensive body of work is underpinned by an interest in how architecture is experienced and how that experience can be designed. Many of Boyd's buildings employ a raft of distinctive circulation tactics that direct where and how people move in and around spaces, often navigating around themes of nature. At Boyd's Featherston House (1969), for example, inhabitants are directed around an inside garden via a series of platforms. At Boyd's own Walsh Street House (1957), occupants are directed around a central courtyard, upwards, downwards, outside and inside. This interest in the curated experience reached a new peak within Boyd's expo designs through the addition of multimedia. Like a film director, Boyd designed and choreographed sequences of experiences, heightened by an incorporation of sound and light shows. The Expo designs not only provided Boyd with an opportunity to develop his concept of the choreographed space through the use of multimedia, but also project an image of Australia onto a broad audience of international viewers.

Marshall McLuhan's influential book *Understanding Media* (1964) announced a paradigm shift from print media to media culture leading to a new collective 'tribal culture' that could cover the individualism of the modern era.¹ Alongside this, the exploration of mixed media peaked in the 1960s with artists like Nam June Paik in Korea, the international Fluxus group and USCO in New York challenging traditional forms of art practice. With advances in film and

sound technology, multimedia became ubiquitous across a range of creative disciplines during this period, flooding 'the senses with electronic multiscreen audio visual "worlds" and strobe-light environments' and drawing 'upon what they took to be McLuhan's ideas about the sophisticated tribalism created by electronic worlds.'² British architect, Mike Leonard, for example, took experimentations in psychedelic light shows to the global arena through the 'Liquid light' shows he produced for Pink Floyd in the mid 1960s. The Archigram Group also 'responded to what the group saw as profound changes in the relationship between printed paper and cultural technologies increasingly dominated by audio visual signal processing.'³ Their *Living City* exhibition (1963), for example, provided an immersive experience through a cacophony of images pasted together to line a frame and animated through flickering light and sound.⁴ Within this context, Boyd's experimentations with media at these international expositions were pertinent and attracted attention across both international and national media platforms.

Like Cedric Price's unrealised Fun Palace, Boyd's Expo '67 and Expo '70 designs were like a total work of art, or *gesamtkunstwerk*.⁵ It was Boyd's mentor Walter Gropius who tested the *gesamtkunstwerk* within architecture through his design of the Bauhaus school where the building and everything within it was designed as a complete entity. Boyd, however, remained closer to the Wagnerian concept of the *gesamtkunstwerk* with his inclusion of light and media shows first tested at his Expo '67 design, and further developed at his Expo '70 design. Boyd's position ran counter to the formalist technological approach of the architects of the First Machine Age, like Gropius and Le Corbusier, and was more in line with Reyner Banham's call to architects of the Second Machine Age made in the final chapter of *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* (1960). In it, Banham stated: 'The architect who proposes to run with technology knows that he will be in fast company ... If, on the other hand, he decides not to do this, he may find that a technological culture has decided to go on without him.'⁶ Boyd proclaimed just a few years later in *The Puzzle of Architecture* (1965) that 'The architect must keep pace with scientific theory and must keep ahead of technology to an extent which enables him to control the latter creatively.'⁷

Opposite
Robin Boyd,
The Puzzle of Architecture,
(Carlton, VIC: Melbourne
University Press, 1965),
RMIT University Library
Special Collection, Peter
Corrigan Collection.
Cover illustration
shows a colour bas-
relief solarization of a
photograph taken by
Mark Strizic inside Kenzo
Tange's Olympic Pools
Building in Tokyo.
© 2019 Estate of
Robin Boyd, courtesy
Robin Boyd Foundation.
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Strizic





The \$3,000,000 Australian pavilion attracted visitors at the rate of 1000 an hour. A relaxed mood was fostered in the pavilion, which was designed as a floating box. On ground level, gum trees and other examples of Australia's distinctive flora and live kangaroos and wallabies showed something of Australia's bush life, while upstairs were displays and examples of Australia's sophistication in technology and the arts.



67

**A DESIGNER'S
WORLD** BY
ROBIN BOYD

EXPO

Boyd designed a range of multimedia experiences at Expo '67. While it was Commonwealth Department of Works architect, James McCormick, who was commissioned to design the Australian Pavilion, Boyd's commission to design the fit-out should not be underestimated.⁸ Arriving at a time when Boyd was struggling to make ends meet, the Expo '67 was a significant commission and a huge responsibility for Boyd to take on as it included 'the complete design integration oversight and control of all exhibit material and all necessary liaison with the Commonwealth Department of Works.'⁹ The exhibit was centred around 'The Australian Adventure', a theme devised by an advisory committee. As the Prime Minister of Australia, Harold Holt, remarked, 'it would be the first time that the achievements of Australian designers and architects would be displayed in open competition with those of the rest of the world.'¹⁰

Boyd treated McCormick's pavilion as a container within which he designed a series of episodic experiential moments that brought the Australian Pavilion to life. Rather than position the visitor as a passive entity who views exhibits, Boyd drew on a range of media and display types to provide visitors with a variety of sensorial experiences. The exhibits and displays included maps, diagrams, cartoons, Aboriginal bark paintings, colour transparencies, black and white photographs, a central trumpet formed sculptural feature, native flora displays along with a dazzling audio exhibit experienced via a custom-designed 'Sound Chair'. Boyd described this assemblage as a kind of microcosm of Australia: 'When you walk through the doors of this pavilion, you enter Australia ... it is a kind of instant micro film of [what is] actually happening and the life going on at this moment on the other side of the globe, 10,000 miles away from Montreal.'¹¹

Boyd designed the exhibits to occupy a variety of spaces each of which had its own distinct character. Visitors entered the Australian Pavilion from the ground floor where they were welcomed by 21 hostesses dressed in bright orange sleeveless A-line dresses made from Australian wool with matching hip length double breasted jackets.¹² From here, visitors could explore Australian nature, a theme common within many of Boyd's residential works but here also served to showcase Australian fauna to the world. A series of outdoor and landscaped areas extended from the ground floor from the front of the pavilion to the rear and undercroft areas where three mushroom formed units accommodated services along with a double height entry space encircled by a ramp. Native flora such as kangaroo paw grasses, eucalypts and ferns along with an artificial billabong were dispersed throughout the space offering a textual and aromatic experience of the Australian bush.

Directed up a circular ramp, visitors would pass by a series of ascending trumpet shaped structures, designed by Boyd, displaying a range of image based exhibits reflecting the theme of 'The Australian Adventure'. The images were presented on transparencies lit by different coloured fluorescent tubes. It was at the top of the ramp where visitors were led to the main exhibition area, a 'huge, elegant salon',¹³ as Boyd described it. White woollen carpet clad the floors and walls, white curtains draped over the

north and south glazed walls and a white asbestos sprayed ceiling served as a backdrop to highlight the exhibits within. Curated within the broader Australian Adventure theme, the exhibits were grouped under the themes of Arts, Way of Life, Sciences and National Development and displayed on low circular units and on the walls.

It was the talking 'Sound Chairs' which were the most distinctive and significant feature of Boyd's design. Two hundred and fifty Sound Chairs were dispersed across the Salon floor adding a sonic layer to Boyd's exhibition design. As a journalist from *The Age* newspaper provocatively reported at the time, were these Sound Chairs offering visitors with 'A psychedelic experience? A drug happening? Not at all.'¹⁴ The Sound Chairs were a comprehensive exercise in interior design, industrial design, manufacturing and sound media. Boyd's idea was to provide visitors with a sonic experience of Australian culture where visitors could listen to conversations from notable Australians on topics relating to the exhibition themes.¹⁵ Under Boyd's commission, well-known Australian designers, Grant and Mary Featherston designed these chairs that were manufactured by Aristoc. Each chair was fitted out with built-in stereophonic sound systems and an automatic switch that was activated when visitors sat in the chairs, triggering the tape recordings to 'present [them] with a description of the visual display in forms of which [they were] seated.'¹⁶ The chairs were upholstered in an Australian black wool fabric with orange cushions added into chairs delivering conversations in French. Boyd wanted to offer a 'restful, welcoming comfort, a haven of tranquillity away from the bustle of the fair ... Fairgoers should advise their friends: 'When tired, go to the Australian pavilion.' Yet, while they rest we will tell them of the Australian Adventure.'¹⁷ The effect was powerful, a field of visitors silently tuned into the audio exhibits within 'the most luxurious and civilised salon at Expo '67.'¹⁸

Contributing to this total work of art, Boyd also played a major role in the content of the sonic media component of the Expo '67 exhibition. Working closely with George Farwell, prominent author and publicity officer for the Expo, Boyd shaped and directed the scripts for the Sound Chairs. While Farwell produced the initial scripts for the chairs, Boyd heavily edited the scripts and forwarded them back to Farwell for the recordings. The scripts marked up by Boyd reveal how the pair together sought to shape a national identity. Boyd was as concerned with the content as he was with the sonic effect of the exhibit. In a letter to Sir Valston Hancock in August 1966, Boyd requested additional conversations such as 'on the "Australian Language", "Democratic Tradition" and "Australian Rules Football" to 'bring the conversations up to thirty. Because there is so much to be said.'¹⁹ Hancock later responded very positively on the conversations:

I have just read the scripts for "The Dry Continent", "Astronomy", "Way of Life" and "How we Live" and I am delighted with them. The closing remark about "instant adventure on the subject of "The Dry Continent" is an absolute gem.²⁰

Opposite
Robin Boyd,
"Expo 67 - A Designers
World", *Design Australia*,
(January 1967): 21-22,
RMIT Design Archives,
Aristoc Industries Archive

Opposite

Robin Boyd,
Expo, media clipping
from unknown source,
RMIT Design Archives,
Aristoc Industries Archive

Following Pages

Left

Robin Boyd, Romberg
and Boyd Architects,
Specifications for
Administration Block
Furniture to be fabricated
for the Australian Pavilion
at Osaka for Expo 70,
c. 1969, donated
through the Australian
Government's Cultural
Gift Program in memory
of Frederick Romberg
and Robin Boyd, 2008.
© 2019 Estate of Robin
Boyd, courtesy Robin
Boyd Foundation

Right Top

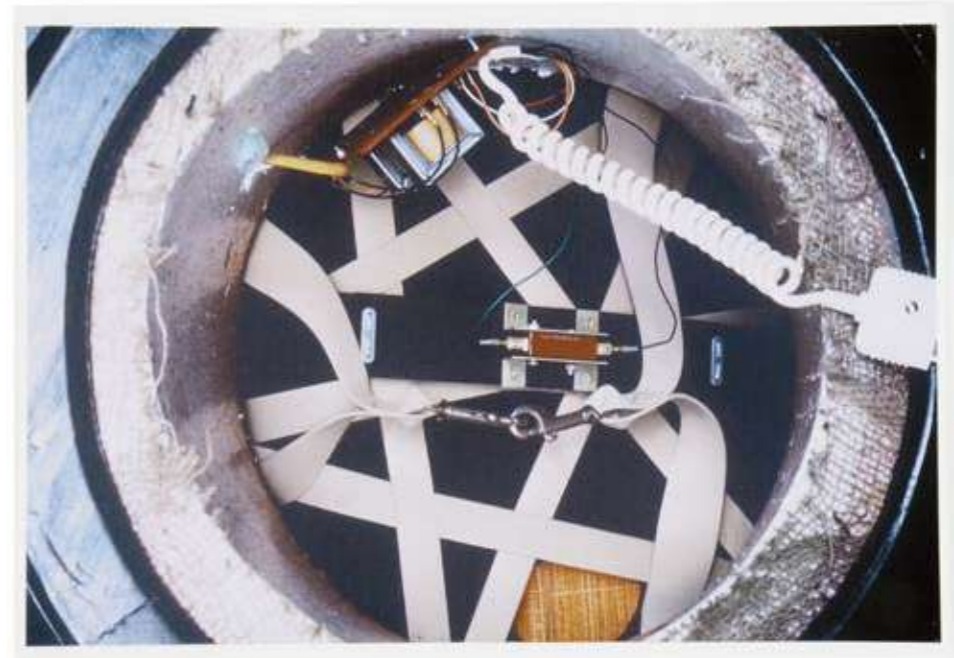
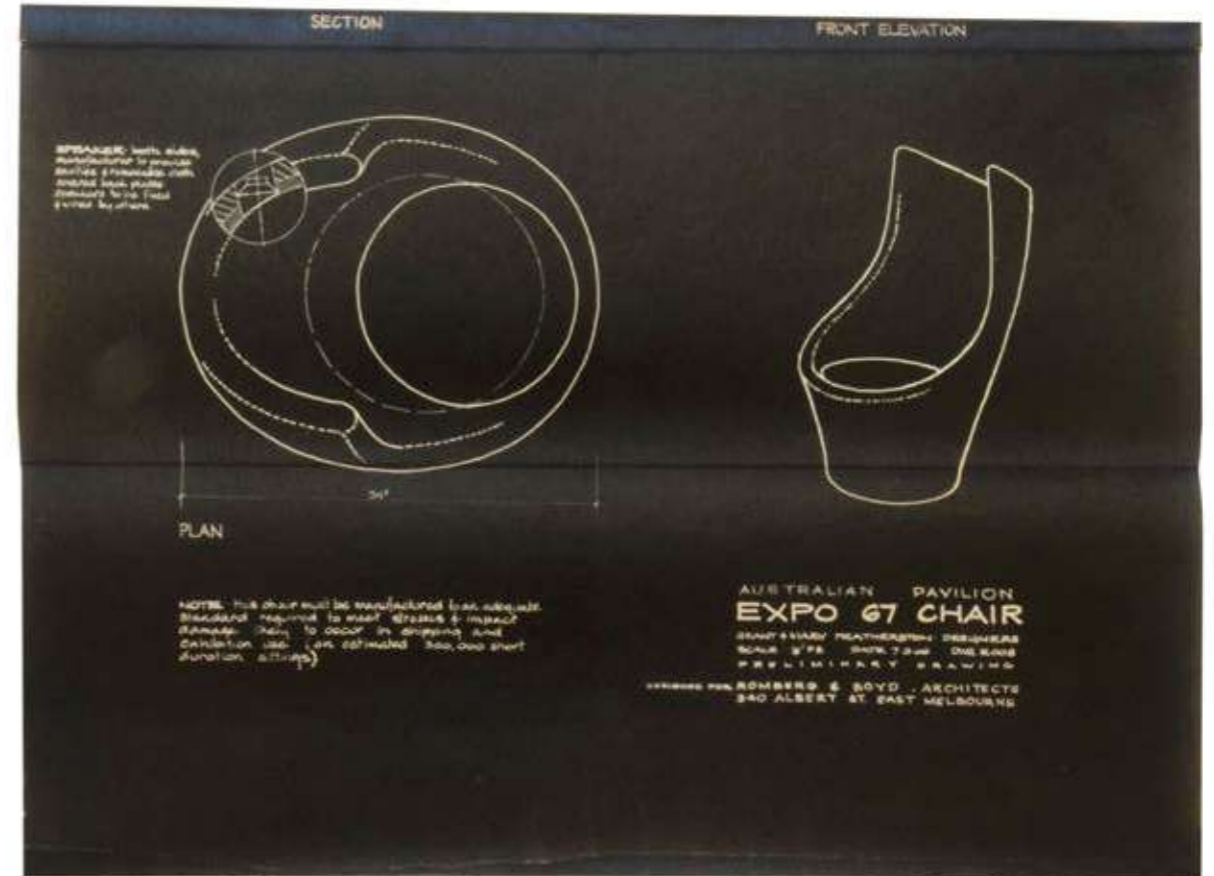
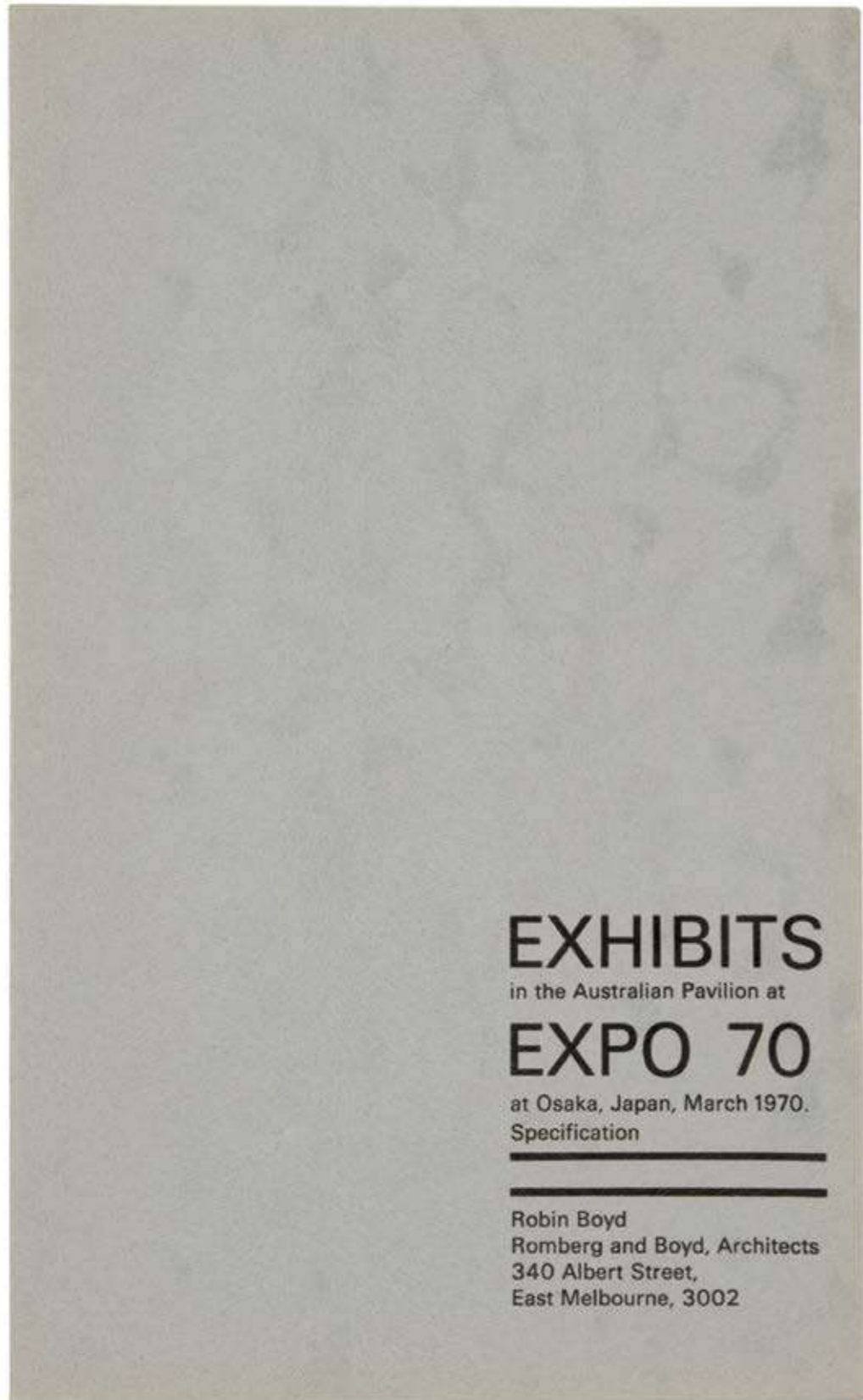
Grant and Mary
Featherston, designers.
Australian Pavilion
Expo 67 Chair, in Robin
Boyd, Romberg and Boyd
Architects, Specifications
of the Exhibits in the
Australian Pavilion at
Montreal for Expo 67,
c. 1967 donated
through the Australian
Government's Cultural
Gift Program in memory
of Frederick Romberg
and Robin Boyd, 2008.
© 2019 Estate of Robin
Boyd, courtesy Robin
Boyd Foundation.
© 2019 Grant and
Mary Featherston

Right Bottom

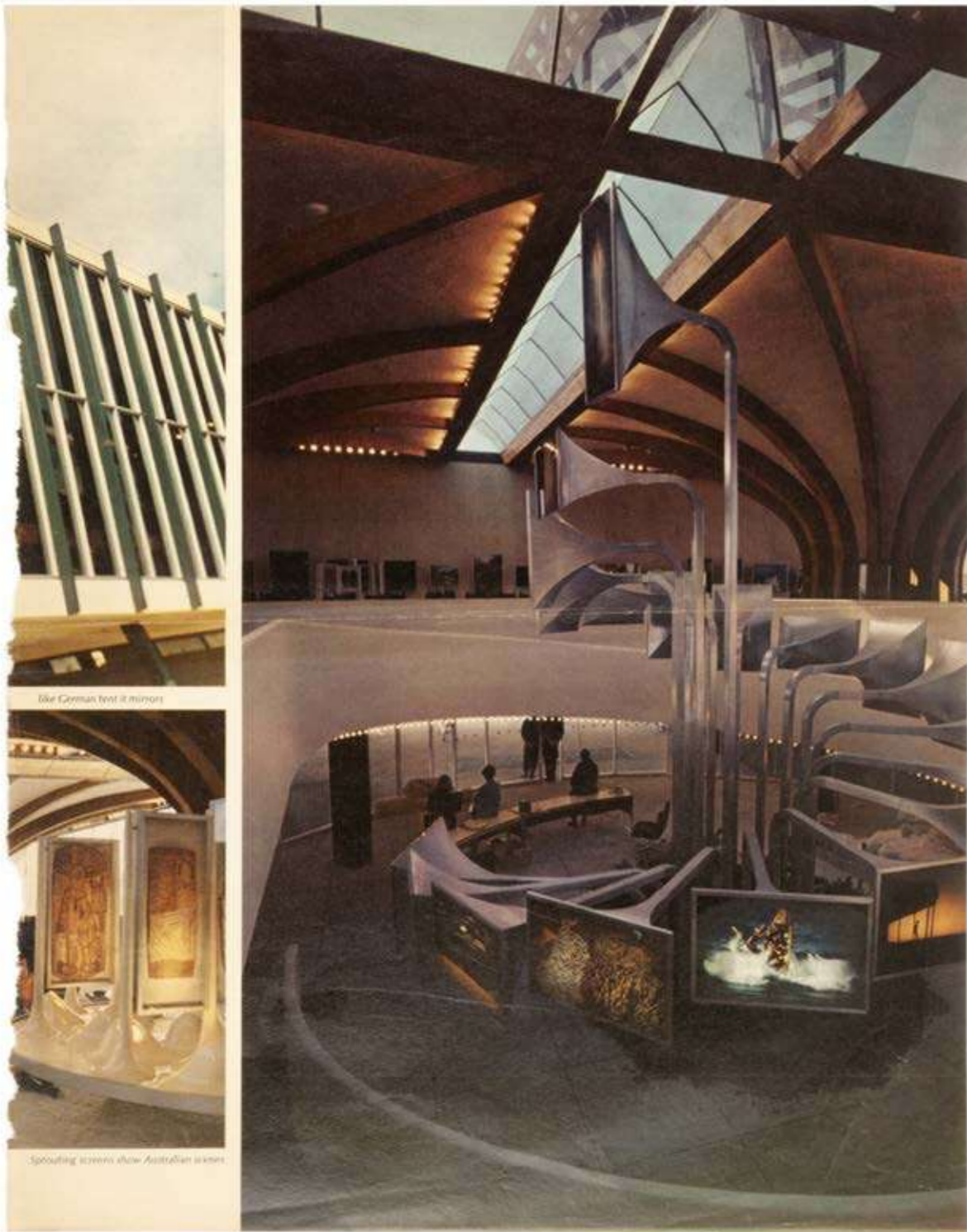
The Australian Pavilion,
Expo 67, Underside of
Sound Chair, RMIT
Design Archives, Aristoc
Industries Archive



INTERIOR of Australian Pavilion has a wide, open look, with curving tree forms. "Talking chairs" invite the visitor to listen to discussions on the Commonwealth displays.



Continued



Like German tent it mirrors

Spouting screens show Australian waters

Australia on show at Expo 67



Pictures by ROBERT FELDMAN

AUTHENTIC COLORS of coral give brilliant life to Barrier Reef display prepared by Mr. E. Grant, a fisheries research biologist, of Brisbane.

With wool, sheepdogs, coral, kangaroos, "talking chairs," and 21 lovely hostesses



MODERNISTIC exterior of the Australian Pavilion at Expo 67 towers over Canberra police officers Inspector L. Connolly and Constable R. Donaldson.

THE picture of Australia as a young, virile, and energetic nation, presented in the Commonwealth's display at Montreal's giant Expo 67, will be emphasised on Australia's National Day, June 6.

Australia's big day ("Special Days" as they are called at Expo) will include basketball, throwing, by Frank Donnellan, sheepdog exhibitions, woodchopping contests between Australian, Canadian, and American axemen, and three-set tennis matches between Australian and U.S. players.

The "Special Day" program will be televised direct to Australia by satellite.

In the evenings of June 5 and 6, there will be two concerts, featuring the Seekers, Roll Harris, Bobby Lind, Frank Donnellan, and Norman Brown.

On the same nights, the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra will give performances with Australian-born soprano Marie Collier as soloist.

From the Stone Age to the Space Age is the main theme of the Australian Pavilion. To give a soft, lush, feeling, wool carpeting is used throughout. At the bottom of the stairs an automatic footmat cleans the undersides of visitors' shoes.

Up the winding rampway to the main display area, the visitor sees large color picture-windows showing various aspects of Australian life.

At the top of the ramp, the floor is covered with double-thick-pile white carpet, which also lines the walls. Even the ceiling seems to be covered by a lush white carpet—an effect created by sprayed asbestos.

Care of the pavilion is a complex system of comfortable "stern" chairs designed by Grant Featherston, of Melbourne. The chairs are grouped around the various exhibits and those who sit in

them hear the voices of noted Australians describing the displays. The tapes play back in French and English.

A model of the Parkes (N.S.W.) radio telescope points toward a huge suspended painting of the Southern Hemisphere's night sky by Australian artist Donald Laycock.

There is also an animated scale model of the Snowy Mountain hydro-electric scheme, a scale model of Canberra, and a collection of contemporary Australian art by Sir William Dobell, Sidney Nolan, Russell Drysdale, Arthur Tuckey, and Arthur and David Boyd.

The art collection is worth about one million Canadian dollars. Dobell's painting, "The Cypriot," alone is insured for 400,000 Canadian dollars.

A down-ramp takes the visitor into a coral reef built from 5000 pieces of authentically colored coral from the Great Barrier Reef.

Another strip of water symbolizes a billabong. Twenty kangaroos, specially acclimated to hearing off-beat noises, music, and the hubbub of big crowds, are housed in an "outback" pen.

Although the organizers did not even start to design the pavilion until October, 1965, the Commissioner-General of the Australian display, Air-Marshal Sir Valentin Huxsock, is proud of the fact that the entire building, its exhibits, and its ingenious sound-effect chairs were ready on time.

The 21 Australian hostesses, selected from every State, and seven young "hosts" had a "crash" course on Australia, its culture, and its way of life to answer visitors' questions.

Estimates of the crowds who will attend the Expo during its six months' life have been rising. First estimate was 20 to 24 million; now it is 40 million.

—Harold Dvoretzky

THE AUSTRALIAN WOMEN'S WEEKLY — May 24, 1967



Preceding Pages

Left

Expo '67, various exhibit types designed by Robin Boyd, *Life*, June 12, 1967: 33, RMIT Design Archives, Aristoc Industries Archive

Preceding Pages

Right

Expo '67, External views, *The Australian Womens Weekly*, May 24, 1967: 8, RMIT Design Archives, Aristoc Industries Archive

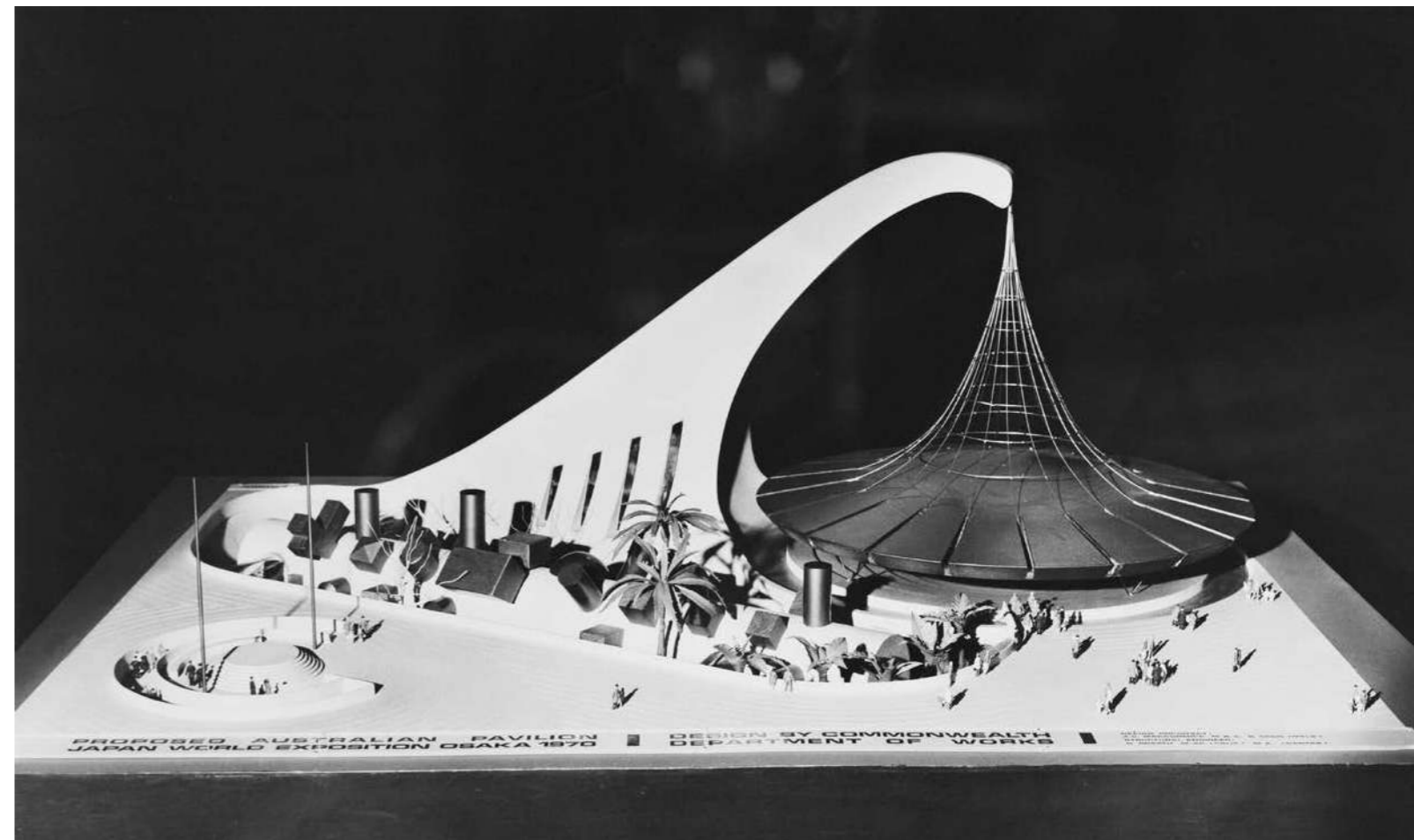
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Expo '67, Trumpet exhibit displays designed by Robin Boyd, courtesy of The National Archives of Australia

Opposite

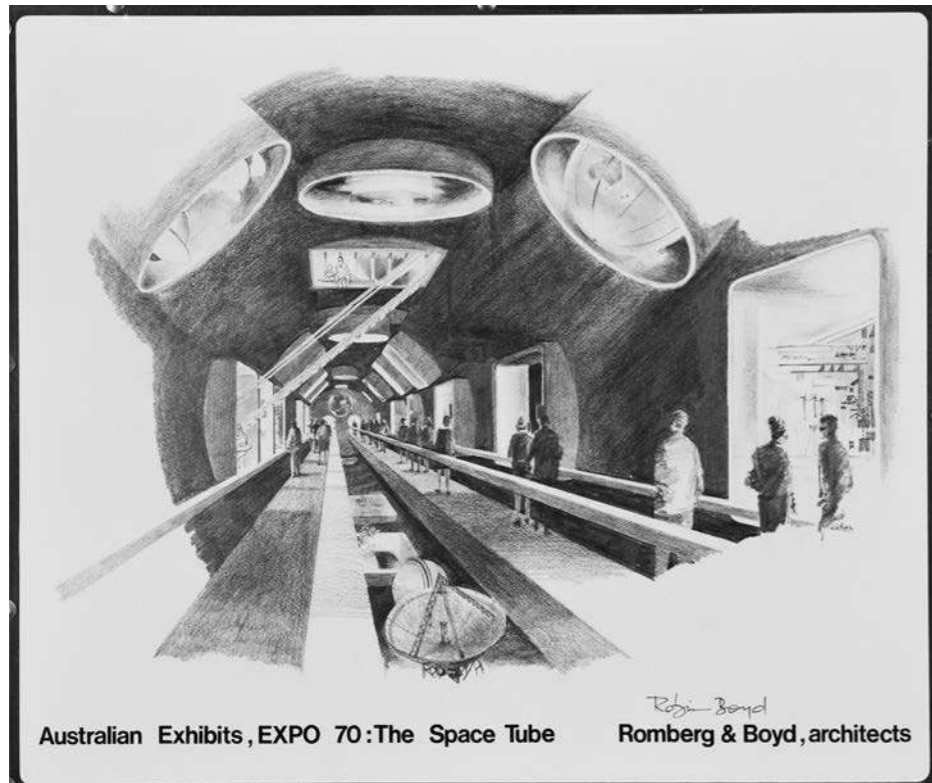
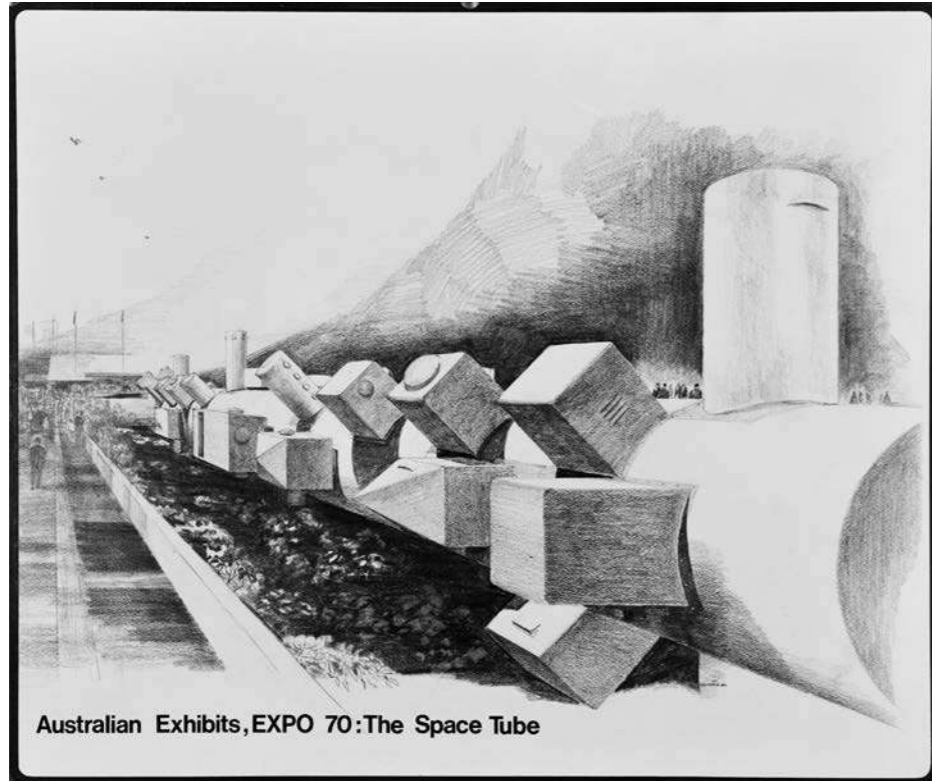
Expos '67, Sound Chairs in the Salon, courtesy the National Archives of Australia

Continued



Left
Expo '67,
Welcome hostesses,
courtesy National
Archives of Australia

Right
Model of Expo '70,
courtesy National
Archives of Australia



Opposite Top
Robin Boyd, Exterior perspective of the Space Tube for Expo '70, courtesy The National Archives of Australia, © 2019 Estate of Robin Boyd, courtesy Robin Boyd Foundation

Opposite Bottom
Robin Boyd, Interior perspective of the Space Tube for Expo '70, courtesy The National Archives of Australia, © 2019 Estate of Robin Boyd, courtesy Robin Boyd Foundation

Above
Visitors inside the Space Tube, courtesy National Archives of Australia

Opposite
Robin Boyd,
Expo 67 - A Designers
World, Design Australia,
(January 1967): 23-24,
RMIT Design Archives,
Aristoc Industries Archive

The Sound Chairs within the Australian Pavilion were unique in comparison to the kinds of exhibits typical at Expo '67 that mostly incorporated film projection technology. As highlighted in the *British Journal of Photography* following the opening of the Montreal '67 Expo, 'it is interesting to the great part which picture and sound presentations are playing in it.'²¹ Judith Shatnoff also reported at the time that 'Going to Expo '67 to see film was like going on a binge, for film was everywhere, unreeling at a furious rate. The most modest pavilion had a 16mm projector grinding out a brave little documentary, while the grander national and theme pavilions featured multi-million dollar shows which explored the latest optical technology ...'²² It was estimated that around 68% of the displays within Expo '67 utilised audio-visual aids 'to attract the attention of the public to the theme of this world fair.'²³ Most of the audio visual aids used across pavilions at the Expo '67 were conventional film projections although the Canadian National Pavilion, for example, incorporated a 360 degree projection screen.²⁴ With a focus on the aural rather than visual, the Sound Chairs thus offered a distinctive experience at Expo '67. They were enormously successful. As reported in *The Age* newspaper at the time, 'The chairs are the Australian pavilion ... and have been sufficient to attract many more thousands of visitors to the pavilion than were expected.'²⁵ With over 1 million visitors, the success of Boyd's exhibit design far exceeded the committee's expectations.²⁶

While the use of mixed media proliferated in the Expo '67 exhibits, it was at Expo '70 in Osaka, Japan where the use of media technologies reached a new zenith. Here the experiments of the 1960s neo Futurist avant-garde were crystallised and broadcast to an international audience, probably 'because of the influence of the Metabolists who were directly involved with the planning of many of the exhibits at Expo 70.'²⁷ This was particularly so with Boyd's design of the exhibits within a Space Tube for the Australian Pavilion. Following the success of Expo '67, McCormick was again commissioned to design the Australian Pavilion, this time as an odd 'coat-hangar' looking pavilion. Boyd was to complete the exhibition design with a theme he devised: 'The Australian Contribution to Progress and Harmony for Mankind'.²⁸

The Expo 70 exhibit aimed to highlight the 'trade aspects' of Australia's relationship to Japan, the 'nature of the Australian economy' and the 'essential effects of Australia's development on our economy and pattern of overseas trade.'²⁹ Boyd was asked to 'present a realistic picture of Australia's industrial growth during the previous 50 years' and depict Australia as a 'country of rapid development' and mineral resources. This was an effort to counter the impression that Australia was a country whose economy was simply based on agriculture.³⁰ At Expo 70 Boyd created a multimedia array in order to relay this strategic message to a broad and international audience.

This image of Australia as an international trade player was communicated via Boyd's Space Tube design, a 'Gunnite' tubular form fitted with travelators and inserted within McCormick's pavilion. Interestingly, and alarmingly (with

the benefit of hindsight), Boyd proposed four sub-themes for the exhibits within the Space Tube: 'Man, Man and Nature, Man and the Man Made, Man and Man'.³¹ The exhibits were distributed thematically along the tube in four segments within twenty displays comprising up to four display boxes arranged radially around the tube. The display boxes for the exhibits were made in Australia and 'simply bolted on and plugged into the power'³² insitu. Like a mad alchemist, Boyd incorporated a number of novel multimedia systems interdependent on the visitor. He was responsible for the design and production of all of the film, visual sequences and sound effects within the Space Tube.

Expo '70 as a total work of art evolved from Boyd's Expo '67 design. It denoted a conceptual leap in his approach to exhibition design. While the Sound Chairs offered visitors a sonic experience at Expo '67, the experience was a passive one. At Expo '70, Boyd introduced movement as a device to direct the visitor's attention through an active experience. The Space Tube was fitted with two travelators that controlled the movement and flow of the visitors. Part of the intent was to provide users with an entertaining experience: 'If a pavilion can give its visitors a new kind of ride it is halfway to success ... Yet the ride must be strictly gentle almost to the point of imperceptibility.'³³ However the experience within the Space Tube was also an exploration in the relationship between the visitor and the exhibits. Underpinning multimedia shows of the 1960s was a shift in the relationship between the 'object' and 'subject'. Where traditionally a viewer receives the object passively, a multimedia work enables 'The user's own choices [to] become an intrinsic part of the multimedia experience'.³⁴ The introduction of movement in the Space Tube also tapped into broader architectural experiments from this period - the idea of mobility had fascinated architects such as Yona Friedman, Archigram and Constant while themes of mobility were also explored at CIAM X at Dubrovnik in 1956.³⁵

Within the Space Tube, moving along the travelators, visitors encountered the exhibits as a sequence of immersive multimedia experiences, in Boyd's words, 'as an unfolding story'.³⁶ He selected the images for the film sequences and displays while mounting the displays at different angles to create different effects. These were overlaid with sound effects synchronised to visual cues, the result of a collaboration between Boyd and the Australian composer George Dreyfus. Of note was the integration of 'technamation effects' achieved by projecting from multiple lights or projects onto a polarised screen creating an almost psychedelic experience for visitors: 'As the viewer moved past the display, the screen would shimmer and ripple with colour and light.'³⁷ One of the most compelling displays within the Space Tube was exhibit 17C, the 'Night City'. This was a kind of simulated night city: a model of a city block in an exaggerated perspective fitted onto a polarised screen. Six projectors were mounted beneath the screen in different directions to simulate night traffic through moving red and white lights.³⁸ This exhibit was innovative in its reliance on the motion of the visitors walking past the display to create its effects. Yuriko Furuhashi suggests that

Every world fair or exposition since the Crystal Palace's day has been a boon to designers of almost every kind. The promoters have been well aware of this, and rather resentful of it. They have no intention of going to such trouble and expense just to put on a sort of Designers' Benefit. Yet they need the designers, and there is not much they can do about it except hope that the content of their show will at least compete with the packaging in the visitors' eyes.

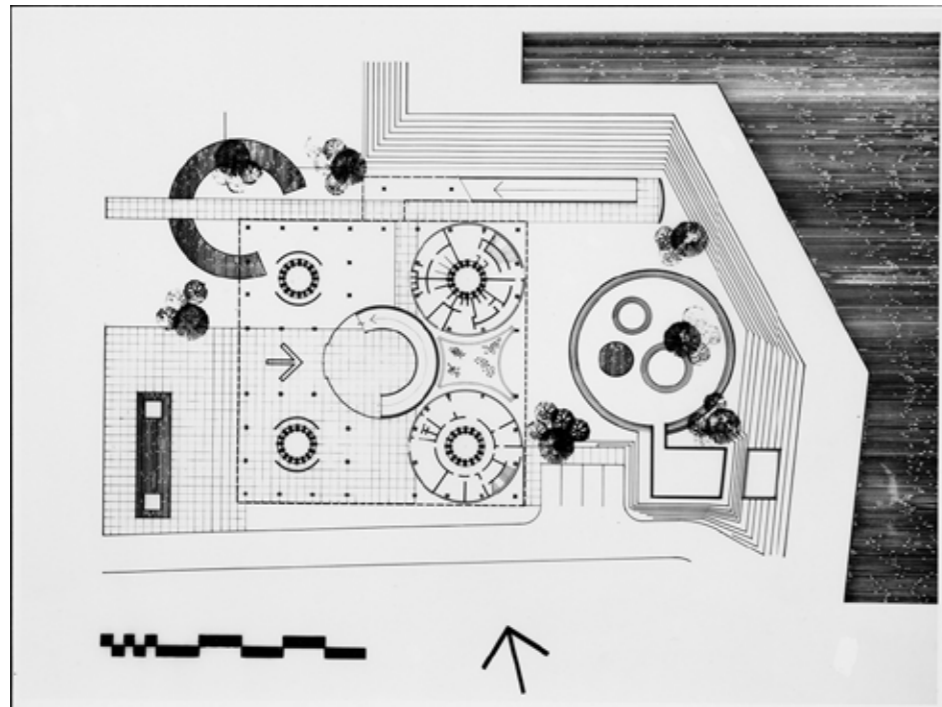
Before Expo 67 opened, the press of Montreal had moments of doubt about the balance of package and content. Everybody had been conscious from the beginning that this fair

intended to be a serious thing. It vigorously dissociated itself from the New York World's Fair even before Mr. Moses' unofficial show fell so miserably flat on its face. Expo was to be non-commercial, an educational and cultural event.

Hence the pretty high-falutin theme, 'Man and His World', and all the sub-themes: Man the Provider, Man the Producer, and so on. Each of these sub-themes was given its own pavilion. These were distributed around the grounds, and being obviously related architecturally they helped to hold the whole show together and in cumulative effect were intended to be the equivalent of the

Visitors were intrigued by the pavilion's 240 electronic "talking chairs" through which could be heard the voices of distinguished Australians giving informal talks on aspects of Australia in the arts and sciences.





This Page
Australian News and Information Bureau, Photograph of floor plan for Australian Pavilion for Expo '67, 1966, donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gift Program in memory of Frederick Romberg and Robin Boyd, 2008. © 2019 Estate of Robin Boyd, courtesy Robin Boyd Foundation

Expo '70 in its entirety, was like a 'simulated future city'.³⁹ He connects this design to Cold War geopolitics, though for Boyd, the interest in the simulated city was more likely connected to his own urban experiments, many of which were not fully realised before his death in 1971.⁴⁰

Another transformative multimedia display within Boyd's Expo '70 design was Exhibit 20: a collaboration between Boyd and experimental Australian multimedia artist, Stan Ostojka-Kotkowski. Exhibit 20 showcased a three dimensional abstract pattern presentation using a laser and 1000 lamps on an 8-ft diameter sphere surrounded by five movie screens showing Australian film successes of the past.⁴¹ It incorporated over 1500 globes operating over two systems: one a colour spectrum forming backgrounds shapes, the other a white light forming designs and figures creating an alluring effect for the visitor.⁴² This collaboration echoes the work of other multi-media cultural producers in the 1960s such as England's Light/Sound workshop partnered with Peter Cook and Dennis Compton from the Archigram Group and created by the National Film Board of Canada for Expo '67 in Montreal.

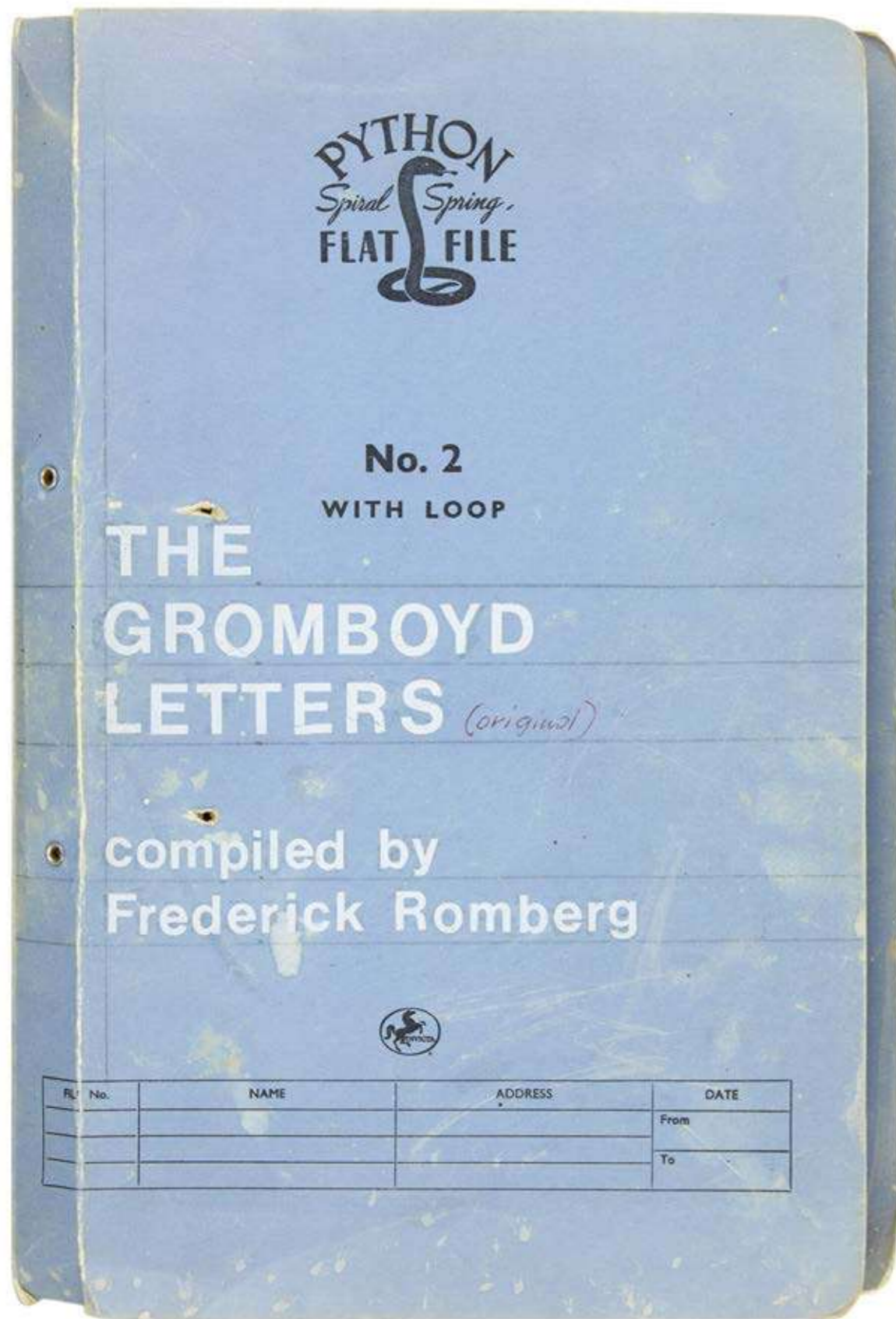
The commission was one of Boyd's most significant late commissions prior to his premature death in 1971, yet largely overlooked by historians and critics, perhaps overshadowed by McCormick's zany 'coat-hanger' looking pavilion structure.⁴³ This is surprising, not just because of its significant fee,⁴⁴ nor because it was one of Boyd's few late realised works, but because of its sheer experimentation that reached a broad international audience in Japan. It must have also been a great delight for Boyd to present his ideas in Japan given his passion for Japanese architecture, evident in the publication of his books, *Kenzo Tange* in 1962 and *New Directions in Japanese Architecture* in 1968.

In the earlier part of the 1960s, Cedric Price had claimed: "We just haven't learned how to enjoy our new freedom: how to turn machinery, robots, computers, and buildings themselves into instruments of pleasure and enjoyment."⁴⁵ Only a few years later at both Expo '67 and Expo '70, Price's claim was realised in many of the pavilions and their presentation as kinds of sensory techno machines. World fairs have typically been ideal testing grounds for artistic experimentation. Within this context, Boyd's expo designs were no exception. They gave him the platform to experiment with his interests in the nexus between body and space and to test these interests on an international audience using many different media platforms. Where the Sound Chairs of the '67 Expo provided a microcosmic audio adventure into Australian life, the Space Tube '70 offered a far more dynamic experience using motion and advanced light and sound shows.

Boyd's comprehensive design and curation at both these expo designs signal him as a champion of new technologies and media. Successfully achieving a total work of art, he was scathing of Frei Otto's tensile structured West German Pavilion and the geodesic dome of Buckminster Fuller's United States of America Pavilion at Expo '67: "But what will be inside these monstrous fragments of Utopia ... An expo should be more than experimental architecture and exterior effects."⁴⁶ During a time when experiments with psychedelic drugs such as LSD had reached a zenith, one wonders whether Boyd himself had experimented with psychedelic experiences. While the extent to which Boyd sought to evoke altered states remains uncertain, his multimedia practice certainly advanced his own architectural experiments where the intertwining of space and media created a flooding of the senses.

Endnotes

- 1 Meenakshi Gigi Druhan and Douglas M Kellner, *Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks* (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing, 2012), 10.
- 2 Michael Heim, Multimedia, *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, 2nd ed., ed. Michael Kelly, (online version Oxford University Press: 2014), accessed May 2019, DOI: 10.1093/acref/9780199747108.001.0001
- 3 Craig Buckley, 'Envisioning Assembly: Archigram and the Light/Sound Workshop', *Grey Room*, Issue 73, (Fall 2018): 27.
- 4 For a comprehensive analysis of Archigram's use of multimedia, see Buckley, 'Envisioning Assembly: Archigram and the Light/Sound Workshop': 26-53.
- 5 Richard Wagner presented the concept of Gesamtkunstwerk, or Total Artwork in 1849 in a highly influential essay called 'The Artwork of the Future'. In it Wagner spoke of a synthesising or 'totalising' of all the arts to incorporate a full sensory experience. See "Richard Wagner, 'Outlines of the Artwork of the Future'", *Multimedia: From Wagner to Virtual Reality* (New York, London: Norton, 2001), 3-9.
- 6 Reyner Banham, *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1980), 330.
- 7 Robin Boyd, *The Puzzle of Architecture* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1965), 161.
- 8 Geoffrey Serle, *Robin Boyd: A Life* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1996), 225.
- 9 Background notes on the Australian Pavilion for Expo 1967, March 4, 1966, SLV: Grounds Romberg & Boyd Archive (GRB Archive), MSS 13363, Box 85 1(C).
- 10 Background notes on the Australian Pavilion for Expo 1967, SLV: GRB Archive, MSS 13363, Box 85 1(C).
- 11 Robin Boyd, 'The Universal and International Exhibition Montreal, The Australian Adventure', 2, SLV: GRB Archive, MS 13363, Box 86 1(B).
- 12 Colour slide of hostesses inside the Australian Pavilion, Expo 67, Montreal, NAA: AA1982/206,29, item 764931, accessed 18 August 2019.
- 13 Robin Boyd, 'Expo 67: The Australian Pavilion', project description 4, SLV: GRB Archive, MS 13363, Box 85
- 14 *The Age*, May 24, 1967, 5.
- 15 Robin Boyd to Mr WS Hamilton, Assistant General Manager of the Australian Broadcasting Commission, letter, January 19, 1966, SLV: GRB Archive, MS 13363, Box 86 1(B). The letter outlines that '540 tapes will consist of repetitions of 20 different 'conversations' with celebrities, each to last about three minutes - all highly concentrated.' These notable Australians were mostly men and ranged from the former Prime Minister of Australia, Sir Robert Menzies, to the then Prime Minister of Australia, Harold Holt through to Nobel Prize winner and virologist, Sir Macfarlane Burnet. See also Expo - 67, Tape Cartridge Schedule SLV: GRB Archive, MS 13363, Box 86 1(B).
- 16 Robin Boyd to TJ McMahon Executive Office Australian Exhibit Organisation, letter, February 10, 1966, SLV: GRB Archive, MS 13363, Box 87 1(B).
- 17 Robin Boyd, 'Expo 67: The Australian Pavilion', project description, 5, SLV: GRB Archive, MS 13363, Box 85
- 18 Robin Boyd, 'Expo 67: The Australian Pavilion', project description, 5, SLV: GRB Archive, MS 13363, Box 85
- 19 Robin Boyd to the Commissioner General Sir Valton Hancock, letter, August 16, 1966, SLV: GRB Archive, MS 13363, Box 85 1.
- 20 Commissioner General Sir Valton Hancock to Robin Boyd, letter, August 26, 1966. SLV: GRB Archive, MS 13363, Box 86, 1(A).
- 21 'More About Expo '67', *The British Journal of Photography*, (May 19, 1967): 431.
- 22 "Expo '67: A Multiple Vision", *Film Quarterly*, Vol 21, No 1, (Autumn 1967): 2.
- 23 "More About Expo '67": 431.
- 24 More About Expo '67': 431.
- 25 *The Age*, June 24, 1967, 5.
- 26 *The Age*, June 21, 1967, 2.
- 27 Peter Raisbeck and Simon Wollan, "Boyd as 'Bower Bird': Robin Boyd's Space Tube and the Global Avant-Garde", in *Proceedings of the Twentieth Society of Architectural Historians Australia and New Zealand*, Sydney 2003, 252-257.
- 28 Boyd suggested the theme of 'The Australian Contribution to Progress and Harmony for Mankind' for Expo '70 and had reported on HSV-7's 'Meet the Press' television programme, that expositions 'were important not only because they also showed that a country was contributing something other than merely feeding itself'. See *The Age*, June 12, 1967, 3.
- 29 Memorandum to Boyd, SLV: GRB Archive, MS 13363, Box 103, 1(c).
- 30 Memorandum to Boyd, SLV: GRB Archive, MS 13363, Box 103, 1(c).
- 31 Raisbeck and Wollan, "Boyd as 'Bower Bird'", 254.
- 32 Robin Boyd, "Expo 70, Osaka: The Australian Pavilion, Proposals for the Exhibits", NAA, A976 1976/2099 Part 2, 1968, 8-11.
- 33 Robin Boyd, "The introduction: a dynamic presentation: The Australian Adventure." SLV: GRB Archive, Box 85 1(C).
- 34 *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. Kelly
- 35 For details of CIAM 10m refer to Eric Mumford, *The Ciam Discourse on Urbanism 1928-1960* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2000).
- 36 Robin Boyd, "The introduction: a dynamic presentation: The Australian Adventure." SLV: GRB Archive, MS 13363, Box 85 1(C).
- 37 Raisbeck and Wollan, "Boyd as 'Bower Bird'", 255.
- 38 Raisbeck and Wollan, "Boyd as 'Bower Bird'", 255.
- 39 Yuriko Furuhashi, "Multimedia Environments and Security Operations: Expo '70 as a Laboratory of Governance", *Grey Room*, Issue 54, (Winter 2014), 59.
- 40 In the latter part of his career, Boyd became increasingly interested in exploring ideas of the city through high rise towers however the more experimental of these experiments, such as the Japanese Metabolist like the 60 Clarendon Street remained unbuild. As Conrad Hamman noted, Boyd 'saw the larger skyscraper commissions fall one after the other into the hands of firms like Stephenson and Turner, or Bates, Smart and McCutcheons ...'. See Conrad Hamman, "Envoie 1962-71" in *Transition*, No 38, (1992): 109.
- 41 Robin Boyd, "Progress Report by Exhibits Architect", June 12, 1968, SLV: GRB Archive, MS 13363, Box 103 1(C).
- 42 Specifications for the displays at Expo '70, SLV: GRB Archive, MS 13363, Box 35.
- 43 Raisbeck and Wollan, "Boyd as 'Bower Bird'", 253.
- 44 The fee agreement of \$75,000 for the project was signed off on 22 October 1968 which included Boyd's design of the Space Tube and its display cases to depict Australian life and industry to a primarily Japanese audience. The commission also included producing and managing the construction of designs for the merchandising. See SLV: GRB Archive, MS 13363, Box 104.
- 45 Cedric Price, "A Message to Londoners", draft for a promotional brochure for the Fun Palace, Marylouise Lobsinger, "Cybernetic Theory and the Architecture of Performance", *Anxious Modernisms: Experiments in Postwar Architectural Culture* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2000), 119.
- 46 SLV: GRB Archive, MS 13363, Box 85, 1 (a).



Anatomy of a practice: The Gromboyd correspondence 1956–57

Harriet Edquist

Robin Boyd’s position as a public intellectual in Australia is founded on his published work which included books, parts of books, articles, newspaper columns, as well as media (radio and TV) presentations. He was called on to deliver public lectures, addresses at exhibition openings, forewords and cover notes that commented on Australian architecture and Australian culture more broadly. As Conrad Hamann has noted, “Combining a sharp wit and a compelling presence with a strong sense of civic duty, Boyd employed all facets of the media in his campaign to shape the cultural debate of Australia and beyond”.¹ There was, and never has been, an Australian architect like him.

While Boyd’s published work, particularly his books *Australia’s Home* (1952) and *The Australian Ugliness* (1960) brought him to public attention and critical review there is another body of Boyd’s writing that has remained largely unexamined as a *corpus* of work - correspondence which reached multiple audiences in Australia and overseas. One group of extant letters relates to the practice of Grounds Romberg & Boyd (Gromboyd) while another comprises personal letters. The practice letters have been used by historians from time to time to illustrate arguments and a selection of his correspondence with Ise and Walter Gropius was published in the special Boyd edition of *Transition* in 1992.² His personal correspondence has to date remained private.

The archive

The Gropius letters are held in the records of Grounds, Romberg & Boyd at the State Library of Victoria, as are Boyd’s personal papers. Another group of letters is held in the RMIT Design Archives and these were preserved and gathered together by Frederick Romberg in the mid-1980s and donated to the Design Archives by his widow, Diane Masters, in 2008. The Romney archive forms one of the foundation collections of the Archives which was established in 2007 and it is regularly consulted by historians, academics and students.³

Romberg arranged the original letters in two Python files, his favourite archival device. The first includes correspondence from 1950 to 1963 covering the Gromboyd years with additional letters inserted at the front from Romberg to Grounds up to the latter’s death in 1981. Romberg placed the letters in chronological order with cardboard markers at intervals to indicate thematic groups. He numbered the sheets in red biro and occasionally annotated them, underlining well-known names, noting the date or the author and recipient if these weren’t clear. The first letter dated November 1950 is from Grounds to Romberg. Grounds, at the time a senior lecturer in the School of Architecture at the University of Melbourne asks

Romberg to continue participating in the work experience scheme arranged for the school’s architecture students.⁴ The bulk of the letters thereafter were written between the partners when one or another was travelling overseas in the 1950s and early 1960s and these are interspersed with office memoranda. The second Python file contains letters between Romberg and Boyd after the dissolution of Grounds, Romberg & Boyd, when Romberg was in Newcastle and Boyd still in Melbourne. Again, each sheet is numbered in red biro. The last in this series was written by Boyd from Royal Melbourne Hospital on 6 October 1971, a few days before he died at the age of 52. At the top, Romberg has written: “Robin’s last letter”. These annotations and highlights accompany the reader throughout the collection as a reminder of Romberg’s affection for his partner but also that we are dealing with a carefully edited archive of material.

Romberg made copies of the letters which, with an accompanying narrative, he probably intended to publish as a book. In reflective mode, his typescript volume “The Gromboyd Letters” offers a parallel account of the practice to that found in the letters. Romberg begins his narrative by noting the optimism of the early days of the practice:

It is hard to describe the enthusiasm and confidence with which we viewed the future, or the warmth of our personal relationships. . . For starters, a number of matters had to be resolved: where our place of operation would be, how to attract work, the way tasks would be allocated between partners. Right from the beginning, it was agreed that we should be absolutely equal –one third each in all matters, including financial.

In 1953, every one of us diverted all the new work in hand to the partnership – not a big lot, but by no means insignificant. In Robin’s case, it was houses, including prototypes for mass production which developers had asked him to design, and one or two shops. In mine, apart from family company promoted jobs like flats in Power Street, Hawthorn, called “Yarralands”, still under

Opposite
The Gromboyd Letters 1953–1971, compiled by Frederick Romberg 1987, donated through the Australian Government’s Cultural Gift Program in memory of Frederick Romberg and Robin Boyd, 2008

Continued

Opposite

Robin Boyd, Letter to Frederick Romberg, 8 October 1971 written a few days before he died at the age of 52, RMIT Design Archives, donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gift Program in memory of Frederick Romberg and Robin Boyd, 2008. © 2019 Estate of Robin Boyd, courtesy Robin Boyd Foundation. © 2019 Diane Masters

Following Pages

Robin Boyd, Aerogramme letter to Roy Grounds and Frederick Romberg, November 14 '56, donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gift Program in memory of Frederick Romberg and Robin Boyd, 2008. © 2019 Estate of Robin Boyd, courtesy Robin Boyd Foundation. © 2019 Diane Masters

construction and a new wing yet to come, several projects I was engaged on for the Lutheran Church of Australia, to which I belonged, and a few buildings for Bruck Mills in Wangaratta. I had met one of the executives through a former client, Stanley Korman, promoter of Stanhill, who also kept nibbling.

Roy contributed a self-financed project he was in the process of completing in spite of his futile commitment to the University. It was a block of flats in Hill Street, Toorak, one of which, planned as a square with a circular courtyard at the centre, was for his own occupation. It was a generous gesture, because the building, original and of distinguished design, was certain to attract a good deal of attention. When, in fact, it was awarded the Victorian Architecture Medal for 1954, it was under the nomenclature of Grounds, Romberg & Boyd –welcome publicity for the new firm.⁵

Composed of three individuals of different characters Gromboyd was held together by their common commitment to articulating a modernist position for Australian architecture and in the early years at least, high regard for each other's work. In their loose confederation, unimpeded by too much red tape, they decided to pool all their earnings into the commonweal; while the office claimed the work of each partner, each nonetheless tended to have his own clients and interests.

Grounds had carved out his career as a domestic architect with houses and several well-received and innovative small blocks of flats while Romberg's experience and his client base were more diverse, including flats as well as houses, high-rise apartments, suburban sub-divisions, and hotels although a number of these remained unrealised. Boyd's practice was largely domestic but included his extensive work as an historian and critic, the proceedings from which Grounds insisted be included in the "partnership kitty", to which Boyd unwillingly acceded.⁶ Initial reception to the partnership was positive, if wary. As Geoffrey Serle has noted, "the profession and to some extent the informed public were excited by this union of such diverse characters, carrying the Modern banner, but some colleagues wondered how long such a partnership could possibly last. All three had strong personalities, attractive to the young".⁷

They took up offices in a terrace at 340 Albert Street, East Melbourne, a property owned by Romberg's family trust. Berenice Harris, who had worked with Romberg since the mid-1940s, joined them; she was a brilliant draftswoman who was also technically proficient and she was the mainstay of the practice, steering it through its most difficult times. Her contribution to the productivity of the office has yet to be fully measured.

The first years went well. By and large they got on amiably, socialised together in the city at Florentino, the Society or the Latin restaurants, and in 1954 acted as hosts to Walter and Ise Gropius when they visited Melbourne. They also took on a collaborative design project, the unrealised Law school at the University of Melbourne. Commissioned by Zelman Cowan, dean of law, it was a cylindrical glazed tower, "floating above ground, it's [sic]

outer perimeter supported by cables suspended from a mushroom roof cantilevered from the central lift core".⁸ It combined Grounds' fascination with pure geometry, Boyd's attraction to bold structural expression and Romberg's for technical ingenuity. This aside, their work initially remained much as it had done: Grounds designed some well-received houses which continued his absorption in simplified geometric forms such as the circular Henty house in Frankston and the Leyser house, Kew, built on a triangular plan; work in Tasmania for Claudio Alcorso was also in the offing. Romberg had work from the Lutheran Church, the increasingly erratic Stanley Korman as well as the Sacred Heart Girls School, Oakleigh, Bruck Mills Visitor Centre, Wangaratta, and ICI Staff House, Deer Park. Boyd's contribution was primarily though not exclusively, domestic and included Pelican, the house for Prudence and Kenneth Myer at Davey's Bay, Mt Eliza (demolished), the R Haughton James house in Kew and Bruck Mills staff housing. Notwithstanding the preservation of their own clients and architectural identity, the partners often worked on each other's projects particularly when one travelled; to keep in touch, they corresponded.

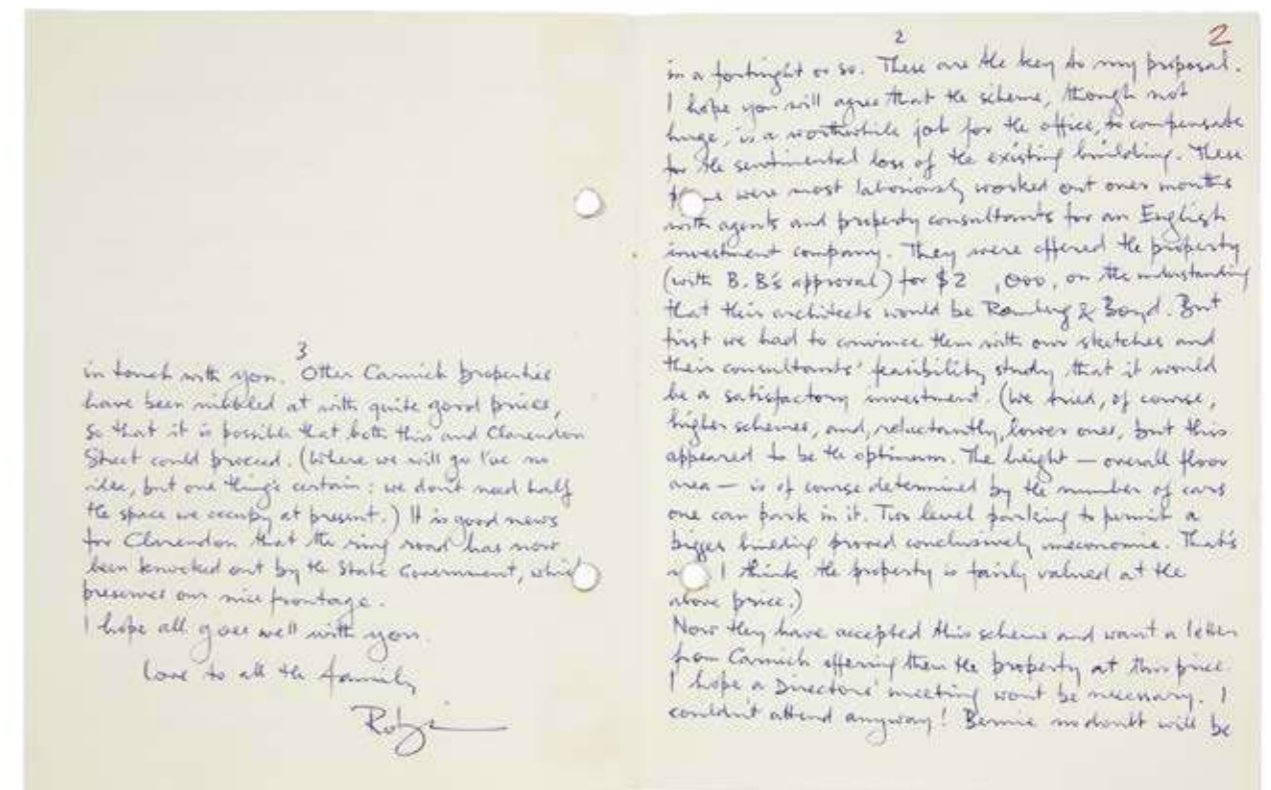
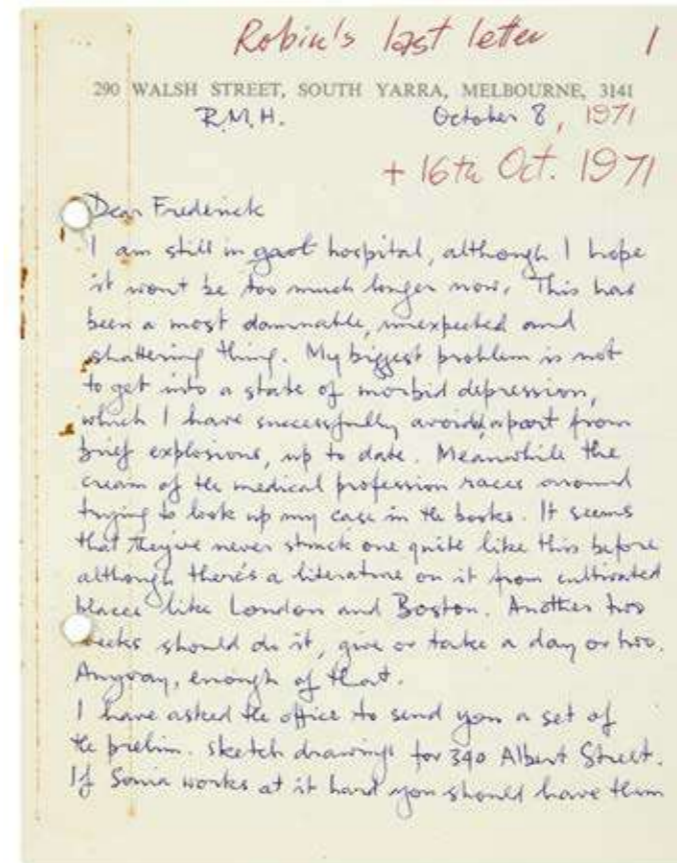
Grounds was overseas in 1955 (Romberg acted as his power of attorney) and when Romberg in turn spent three months away early in 1956 his partners took care of his jobs. Returning in June he found "Gromboyd a beehive of activity. Still lots of houses, but also a couple of major projects on the horizon".⁹ One of these projects was their appointment as joint architects with Yuncken Freeman Brothers Griffiths and Simpson for the Sidney Myer Music Bowl, and the other was an invitation to submit a proposal for a new Academy of Science building in Canberra. At this stage their most important client was Kenneth Myer, whom both Grounds and Boyd had known for some time and introduced to the practice. Myer was an enlightened patron who, with other members of his family, was intimately associated with the planning and construction of the Music Bowl and, it was surmised, would be involved in the National Gallery commission then hovering on the horizon.¹⁰

Boyd in America: 1956–1957

It was just at this interesting juncture that Boyd was offered the opportunity to take up a visiting professorship at MIT at the invitation of the dean of architecture and planning, Pietro Belluschi.¹¹ It was to be for twelve months from August 1956 and the letters to and from Boyd and his partners reveal the dynamics of the office, what made it the success it was but also what were to be the seeds of its demise.

Although his absence from Melbourne put Gromboyd through its first major test, Boyd was unapologetic:

I know my year away has put a terrible strain on the show and was ill-timed and all that. It won't have any direct effect of getting more work (America-wise) either. But I'm sorry; I needed it. As far as I'm concerned it's been an invaluable investment. There's something cloudy that hangs over an Australian who's never seen this country, and I've got rid of that. I've learnt things I couldn't at home.¹²



Continued

34 Fernald Drive - November 14 '56

I love your IBM typewriter. But couldn't you get a bigger type face? The Institute will be high further to my letter of yesterday re. the Meyer shell, I've been thinking more of it. The overall shelter, we all agree I think, is a first-rate idea. But I'm scared, as is doubt everyone else is, that it could look awfully cheapjack, despite its size - like Oral Roberts' tent petrified in streaked concrete. Further to the point I was making yesterday, that the points of support for the form-work are not necessarily the best points of support for the set concrete, I think that any change in the position of the poles would assist in removing the Salvation-Army-tent appearance. Thus:



would be preferable to me to the design shown, the petrified canvas. And how are we going to finish the top? Wesco? Thank you, Roy, for your letter of October 26, received just as we left for a week in New York. Fred: please let me have Redpath's N.Y. address. He is not in the phone books (not Manhattan, anyway), now is Stanhill. The only Stanhill was Stanhill Fashions and when I rang they said the phone had been cut off, so I guessed that wasn't the one. Tell me, and I'll write to him and see him next time I go. Thanks for information re Date (perfect arrangement, now we should get credit for all the things he cut out and no blame for all the things he puts in) and Jimmy James (good luck!). Sounds bad (my fault) about Son's Easter being dropped. I had insisted to Croft from the start that the sun-shades were an essential integral part, only left out of the construction to make the dirtiest-cheap roof. And glass areas could be reduced by solid panels in bottom sections. But I think the whole basis of that scheme was wrong for Croft. Wisely, he keeps a comfortable profit on each unit. But this cuts him out of the cut-throat field. He would be better off doing a more expensive house: a pre-cut round \$5000 or even more with equipment lifting it right out of the builders' field. That is the trend in pre-fab here. Carl Koch, after numerous failures, is now doing well with a split-level 'Peninsula' - no better built than Croft's work, but with a dream-style kitchen-utility set up. It's not the cheapest house available, but he sells it easily. Before I heard your report on Son's Easter I had been intending to write to Croft a chatty note on these thoughts. Should I? I'd like to keep him warm. I also think our oft-discussed cost of house scheme must be developed - but not on the fibro-&-mud level. The vitality of Australian house design should be combined with the civilized American way of selling a house: with proper equipment and landscaping. The extra \$1000 spent on this,

on top of a \$4-5000 Peninsula, would surely pay for itself. Monstera Dept.: Loved N.Y. Love Home the last word, but Lord! how the others keep jabbering on. The Mies-Philip Johnson Seagram's bldg - bronze curtain walls - looks like a dirty carbon copy of the old story. Called on Mrs Stackpole (Steve was away) in New Canaan, which was looking a bit ragged with the trees bare, and at the Johnson home (he was out) which was looking a little less than Forum - smooth, with the gravel coming off the roof. But it is an impressive example of whole-hogger. I even found myself taking the never-before-photographed three round windows on the guest house. The Guggenheim is a hole in the ground still, six months after they moved out of the old building. Sweeney (charming bloke) told me of the hair-raising impracticalities of P. L. H. W.'s plans. He expects the building to be ready in two years. (In Park Ave. is another hole in the ground with a signboard: "...31-story offices... to be ready summer '57")

From Robin Boyd
34 Fernald Drive
Cambridge, Mass., USA

AIR LETTER
AÉROGRAMME

NO TAPE OR STICKER MAY BE ATTACHED
IF ANYTHING IS ENCLOSED, THIS LETTER
WILL BE SENT BY ORDINARY MAIL

Messrs. Gromboid, Romberg and Boyd,
340 Albert Street,
East Melbourne, C.2.,
VICTORIA
AUSTRALIA

28

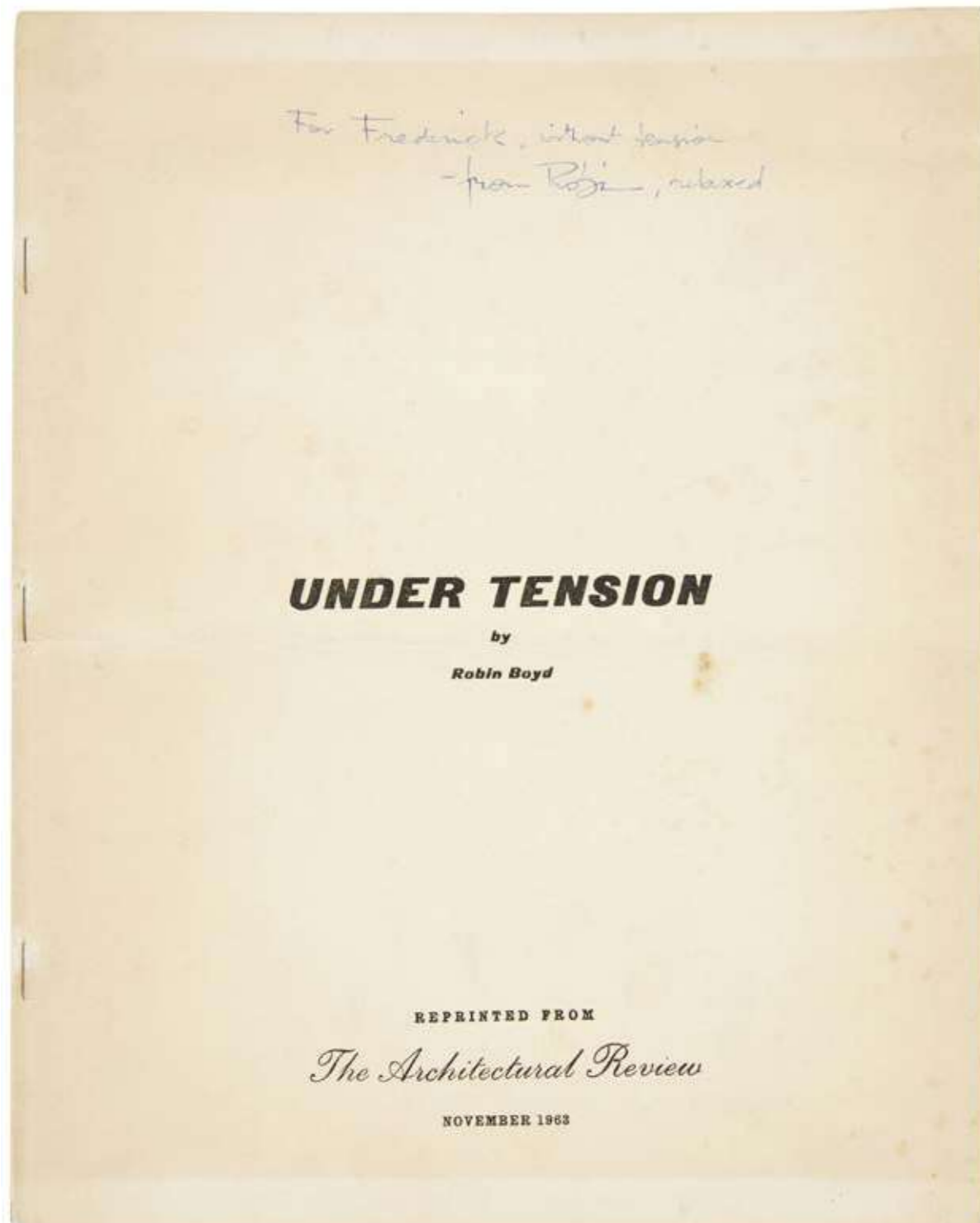
VIA AIR MAIL
PAR AVION

1956

NOV 15 5 30 PM '56

10¢

Wright changed the plans after signing the contract. Guggenheim doesn't expect to pay any more for this. Meanwhile they are planning how to make the change which Wright won't allow immediately he hands the building over to the owners. Had a long talk with Thomas Reighton (Proc. Arch.) on the hazards of criticism. The architects have the magazines hog-tied. A smallest qualification of praise and they refuse even to let them publish another of their buildings. Tried to look for 'Kind Lady', not that we wanted to see it, but just as a typical Broadway musical. Was offered seats for June 4, 1957 - earliest available. But saw a couple of fair recs and several millionaires night clubs with conical joles and martinis at \$2.50 a pop. Entered N.Y. first at peak period but found driving was not difficult owing to excellent traffic-control. Crippled expense! Roy - I've put in hand order of a fleet of Reynolds' lowered sun-shield. Kaiser don't make it, they don't. All the best to all R



Boyd trusted his partners to oversee his work; indeed, it is difficult to see how he could have contrived to spend a year away unless he had the support of his partners back in Melbourne. Some of his buildings were well into construction phase, such as the Myer house 'Pelican' which was completed by Romberg. Others, such as the Houghton James house had scarcely begun but was finished by the time he returned home. While this reciprocity between the partners was one of the reasons for the resilience and success of the firm and can be seen in action in the letters, the fault lines that were to bring it undone in 1962 also began to appear at this time. So much so that early in February 1957 Romberg wrote gloomily:

The truth of the matter is that things are far from well with Gromboyd. Let me say at once there is nothing personal in the present situation. Roy's and my ways are as different as ever, but we remain curiously attached to each other, even occasionally getting together and facing up to facts. Such an occasion happened yesterday, and I was delegated to familiarise you with the position. Roy would have done it more sparingly, and perhaps more optimistically, but he is so busy.¹³

The Sidney Myer Music Bowl

One of the facts they had to face up to was that they had lost the Myer Music Bowl commission. In 1956 the Trustees of the Sidney Myer Charitable Trust had appointed Yuncken Freeman Brothers Griffiths and Simpson together with Grounds Romberg and Boyd joint architects of the Myer Music Bowl to be sited in the King's Domain.¹⁴ This was the job that Boyd saw as "their sort of work" a prominent cultural building with high publicity value. He had taken the lead in discussions with Barry Patten from Yuncken Freeman (Yunfree) before he left Melbourne, "and had amusingly drawn fanciful sketches and illustrated with an umbrella how a canopy might stand up".¹⁵ One of his first tasks on arriving in America was to inspect the acoustics of the Hollywood Bowl, meet its "very competent and helpful" sound engineer Alfred W Leach, contact Professor Newman, a world expert on acoustics, compare advice from both men and report back to the office. This task provided much of the content of the September 1956 letters. Meanwhile in Melbourne a scheme for the Bowl was presented by the architects to the clients, the Sidney Myer Trust, in early September, but additional funding had to be sought, and when this was approved in mid-September the project was able to proceed apace.

While the architects were to work in collaboration Grounds apparently suggested that "Yunfree would do all the work below ground and we the rest. Yunfree didn't like that much".¹⁶ In addition, Grounds took the leading position for Gromboyd although it was a task for which he may not have been well suited, and he relied heavily on the distant Boyd for advice. Romberg was reluctant to be involved and remained on the sideline, an increasingly embittered observer. In the face of this fragmented presence, Yuncken Freeman presented a forceful, united front and in October Patten produced a model for the shell at a client meeting, at which point, in Romberg's eyes at least, the game was over. While he thought that Patten's design was very close to

Frei Otto's work (presumably the Kassel bandstand of 1955) "nobody knew that of course and at the meeting everybody fell in love with the idea, - to hell with acoustics, Hollywood Bowl, Leach or Newman".¹⁷ He could see the clients were impressed and wanted to get on with construction; Gromboyd had no counter measure in place and Romberg did not think that Grounds understood the danger they were in of being side-lined. Grounds, on the other hand was more optimistic about the meeting:

they brought up a rough clue that Barry Patten had produced, which we all studied and agreed unanimously was a first-class idea. It is now being pushed into a little more shape to send over to you in a few days for you to get down to with Newman to tell us if it is in any way acoustically possible. Basically, it consists of some tension wires, a couple of steel masts and some concrete sprayed over mesh to form a huge permanent tent-like partial enclosure for the orchestra, stage and most of the seated audience, with a very light amount of earth-moving only.¹⁸

Boyd responded in mid-November with sketches of three possible structures noting:

The overall shelter, we all agree I think, is a first-rate idea. But I'm scared, as no doubt everyone else is, that it could look awfully cheapjack, despite its size - like Oral Roberts' tent petrified in streaked concrete. Further to the point I was making yesterday, that the points of the support for the form-work are not necessarily the best points of support for the set concrete, I think that any change in the position of the poles would assist in removing the Salvation Army-tent appearance.¹⁹

Boyd's reply was taken on board by the Melbourne team and Grounds soon reported that they were all "very happy at your reaction and Newman's. We are starting the preliminaries this week on the lines indicated in your letters, with Bill Irwin formally appointed as Consulting Engineer".²⁰ From this sequence of letters and Boyd's sketches of possible structures, it might be construed that the design of the Music Bowl shell was as much Boyd's as it was Patten's. If this is in fact the case and Gromboyd had an equal stake in the design of the building, then Boyd's relatively breezy confidence about the project in early 1957 is understandable: "The Bowl serial is engrossing. I can hardly wait for the next instalment".²¹ As a consequence, Grounds felt he could nominate himself to lead the project on behalf of both firms, a position that would be untenable if Gromboyd had no design input into the Bowl. It was dismissed by both Yuncken Freeman and the clients and may have caused the final rift between the firms and the withdrawal of Gromboyd.²² The denouement came as a shock to Boyd who reacted with horror and disbelief at the news that his partners had lost the project to Yuncken Freeman. Romberg told him the gruesome news in a letter on 6 February and Grounds a week later. For Romberg, the outcome was the culmination of his worst fears of October; Grounds was more oblique:

Reference the enclosure from this morning's "Age" and without delving into unnecessary post-mortems, I have outlined a paragraph and now quote the last paragraph

Opposite
Robin Boyd,
"Under Tension",
Reprinted from
The Architectural Review,
November 1963, cover with
inscription 'For Frederick,
without tension - from
Robin, relaxed', RMIT
Design Archives, donated
through the Australian
Government's Cultural
Gift Program in memory
of Frederick Romberg
and Robin Boyd, 2008.
© 2019 Estate of
Robin Boyd, courtesy
Robin Boyd Foundation

Following Pages
Robin Boyd,
Letter to Frederick
Romberg 16 November
1970, RMIT Design
Archives, donated
through the Australian
Government's Cultural
Gift Program in memory
of Frederick Romberg and
Robin Boyd, 2008. Written
after his visit to the School
of Architecture at the
University of Newcastle,
Boyd sketches some ideas
for Romberg's City Council
Offices in Newcastle.
© 2019 Estate of Robin
Boyd, courtesy Robin
Boyd Foundation.
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Continued

ROMBERG AND BOYD, ARCHITECTS, 340 ALBERT STREET, MELBOURNE, 3002. *41-5351

RB/SS

31

November 16, 1970.

Professor F. Romberg,
62 Newcomen Street,
NEWCASTLE. N. S. W. 2300.

Dear Frederick,

Thanks enormously for everything. I'm glad you talked me into it at last! It was a memorable experience. But the only important thing now is the town hall. I've been thinking of little else since. I wonder if everyone working on it realises completely how important it is. I didn't, before I saw your drawings. It's likely to reverberate around Australia; this building. That's because it is phenomenal to have anything of its size and ambition being done outside a capital city, and because it is a very daring concept. So it will either come off as a spectacular success, an Ansett-tour attraction and a multi-bronze-medallist, or it will make a deafening thud. It can't be a quiet pass.

Of course it has to be the spectacular success and I'm sure it will be, but the thing to watch is — as we all realised, but I just want to confirm it — not getting committed to an unstudied design by premature presentation to the client. You were so right when you said to the assembled team that things just don't go as smoothly as this job has so far. Every building should be redrawn at least three times! I hope the team is re-swinging into it with the enthusiasm it deserves.

No doubt you'll be sending me a copy of the memo covering our discussion, but for my own satisfaction I have tried to cover the points diagrammatically, for simplicity, and enclose my Sunday scribbles with apologies for gross errors in memory of proportions, etc.

The one new thought incorporated in the scribbles is an idea I had on the Tollway: for additional simplicity, strength and conviction, and in order to terminate the top more decisively (as we all wanted) without adding a new element: why not extend floor 5 out to floor 6, making a sudden bolder break instead of two small ones? Don't tell me: I know you all had that idea first and discarded it, but unless there are any compelling functional reasons against it, I think you were mistaken if you did so discard it. I gather that the extra bit of floor space on the fifth floor would not go amiss as 'future expansion'; or the extent of the projection could be a compromise between the present two steps, thus not increasing the overall floor space. If you discarded it because it might be a bit reminiscent of a water tower, I wouldn't worry about that. It does remind me a little of one now, and I think that that's quite a fetching Aussie resemblance to have. If I remember aright, the two top floors serve sister functions: mainly planning and building,

.../2

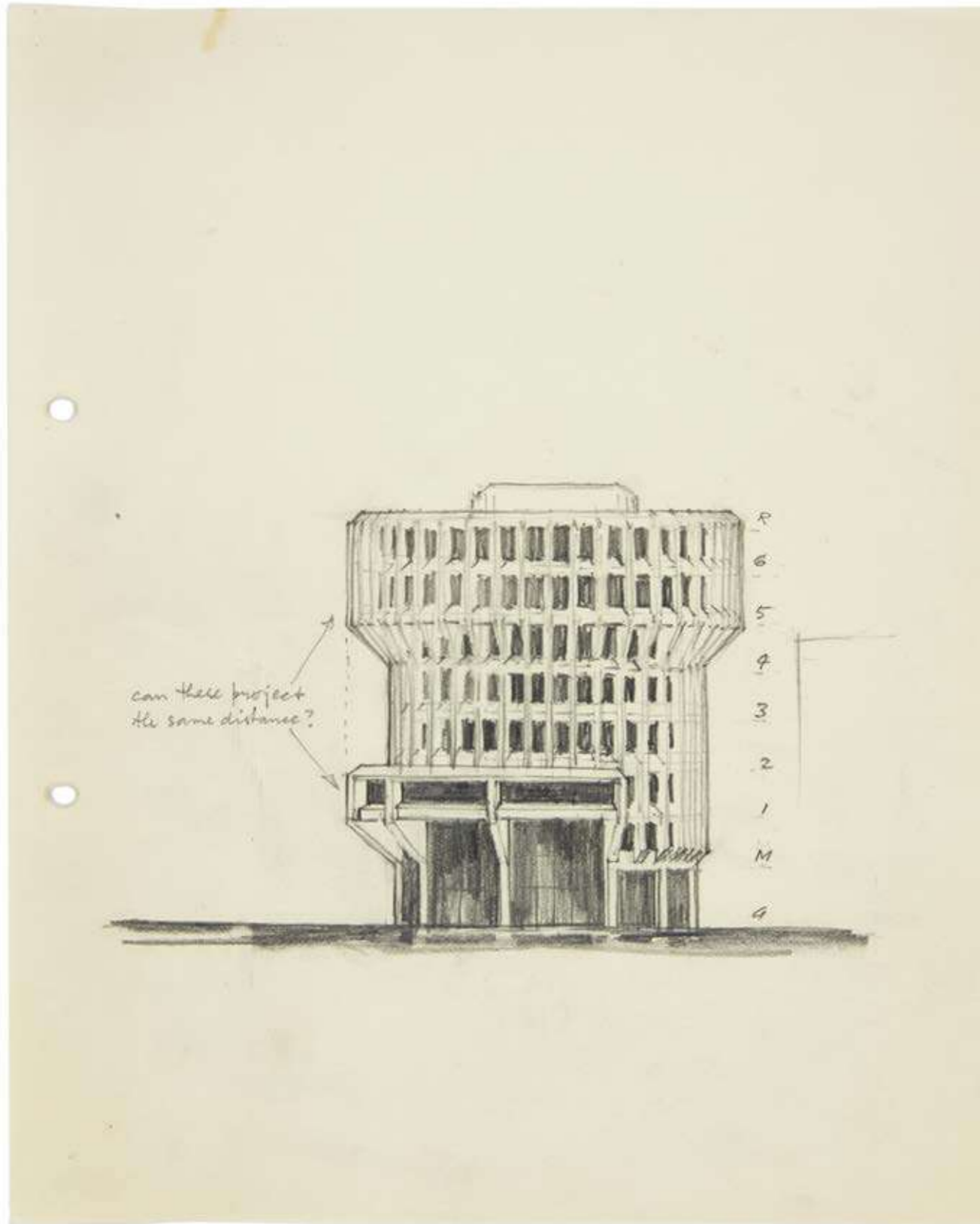
ROMBERG AND BOYD, ARCHITECTS

2.

32

and some amenities, no? If so, there is every justification to link them visually — and the next thought is: can they be linked internally, spatially, somewhere? Presumably opposite the lifts: a decent big two-storey stair hall-cum-coffee room (or something) overlooked by balconies from the planning department (or words to that effect...) And if something on those lines is feasible, then how about stopping the lifts at the lower level and letting the big stair hall serve the top floor? This is probably impractical, but my main reason for suggesting it is that in retrospect I start to think about the lift motor penthouse and how much nicer it would be if it were lower; for one will see it, surely? Not from close up, but from higher points all over the city, and it won't go away if we just don't look at it.

Yours ever
Roger



of a three page letter from the Yunfree office to Ken Myer dated 13 December, signed by them for Yunfree and Gromboyd, dispatched without reference to us and quickly objected to by me after a discussion with Fred on the grounds that it was unrealistic and irresponsible. It was this action that was the final spark for the big flame. Quote – “We are developing these preliminary sketches towards working drawings with a view to letting the earth moving contract early in the New Year”. Unquote.²³

Boyd was both incredulous and anguished that so long-standing a client as Kenneth Myer could have been put offside and without apportioning blame, he could see what disunity between the partners had led to:

the Music Bowl is another matter. There I can see that my return would have helped. We wouldn't have broken with Yunfree if I'd been there, because my mealy-mouthed compromises would have saved the break, which is, as you say, a debacle, and a disaster, and to my mind still inexplicable. No matter what underhand work the Y-F's were doing, why did we have to stand out for an impossible demand (so late in the game; the clients weren't interested in who did it, just in getting it done)? And why couldn't we play along? And why, if we couldn't, didn't we make a great gesture of resigning for the better good of the job rather than waiting to be fired in the trap set by Y-F? So I see I may be able to bring a certain cringing servility to our dealings with other people, to help stem the tide of client defections, but what else? Lord, I hope the Myer break isn't as bad as it sounds.²⁴

Boyd was right; his great talent was to get on with people, to keep the desired end in sight and not let personal agendas obtrude. Grounds proved not to be the right person to lead Gromboyd in this complicated partnership arrangement; Boyd was the partner best able not only to design the shell but to deal with the complex issues of acoustics and technology it raised. Romberg may have had much to contribute as well to the project but his reticence and reluctance to be involved and, probably, to compete with Grounds, contributed to the firm's failure. The partners believed that Yuncken Freeman had wrested the Bowl from them in an underhand manner following a long-held plan, but this is by no means proved in the correspondence.

While Romberg apportioned blame to both for the fiasco, he also had dim views about Grounds' capacity to collaborate:

Roy, constitutionally I believe, is not capable of working in a team with anybody for any length of time, - after the first burst of euphoria at any rate - hence the various break-ups with Mewton, Brian Lewis, Yunfree (Music Bowl) and more recently Colin Philp in Hobart. Will our turn come?²⁵

The Academy of Science building, the commission for which somewhat assuaged their disappointment over the Music Bowl, was, significantly, under Grounds' sole control, indeed Romberg thought he was being “secretive” about it. His comments proved prescient.

Aftermath

Boyd's year away was not the disaster that Romberg predicted in February 1957, in spite of the Music Bowl

debacle. By the time he returned to Melbourne the office was humming; his unfinished houses had been completed by his colleagues and new work had come in. In its first few years Gromboyd had completed

numerous houses, blocks of flats, a school, factories, amenity buildings etc., - all smallish or at best medium sized. Now larger work came our way, some with prestige value with resultant publicity. Apart from the Academy of Science, currently on the drawing boards, there was the Japanese Embassy in Canberra, buildings for the C.S.I.R.O. [...] a series of projects for Ormond College and Melbourne University, a motel, a church, another school (the hoped for Lutheran College), more factories, more flats, including the tallest residential block in Melbourne (Domain Park). Nothing really big yet, but getting that way.²⁶

To meet this challenge of new work they gradually expanded the staff to 30 people “ready for any sized job”, and promoted Berenice Harris, James McCormick and Paul Wallace to associateships. At the same time Grounds orchestrated an internal reorganisation of the office. Boyd's absence had highlighted a serious fault line that ran between Romberg and Grounds, and it was perfectly clear that without Boyd to mediate between these two men the practice would not work; had Boyd been in Melbourne they would undoubtedly have remained on the Music Bowl team. Both Grounds and Romberg knew this, and Grounds decided to act. On 12 December 1957 he circulated a seven-page memorandum to the partners:

The purpose of this memorandum is to try to isolate the possible causes of disagreement, and to put forward proposals which may result in the formation of a coherent policy, with an administrative procedure to make that policy effective. Unless this is achieved, I believe Gromboyd will disintegrate through a combination of misunderstandings.

Our purpose in deciding to join forces four years ago was to capitalize on the positive qualities of the three individual partners on the assumption that the product of the whole would be better than the sum of the parts. It was hoped that our combination should result in greater opportunities for making a contribution to the architectural growth of the community.²⁷

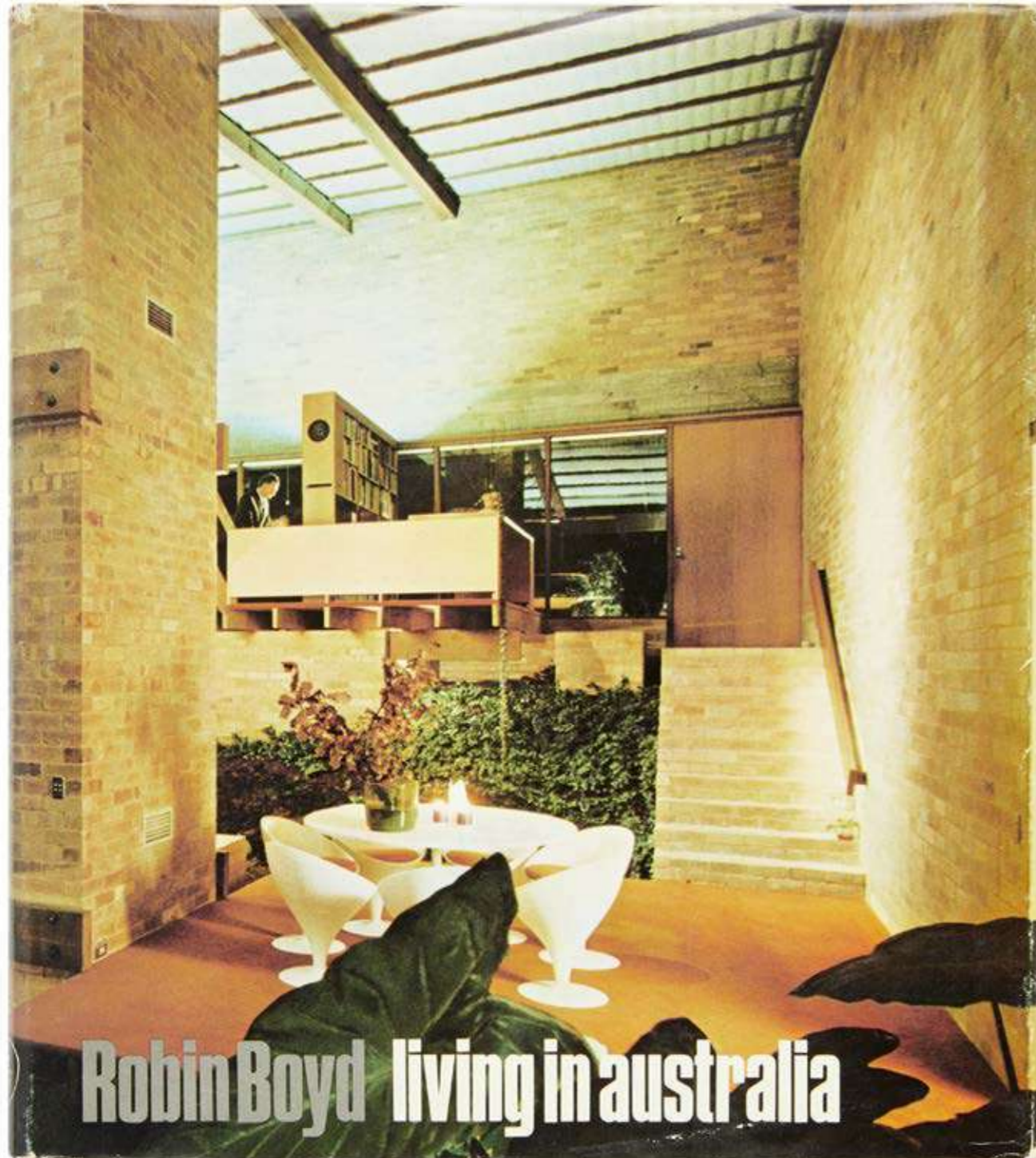
He outlined the positive and negative aspects of this endeavour:

On the positive side, we have surprised our colleagues by remaining together. We have shown our flexibility to being able to deputize for each other in any category of work. When the pressure is on, we have learned to work together as individuals in a partnership on a series of isolated projects. This has been sufficiently successful on some occasions to indicate that, if we desire, the process can be further extended to become comprehensive, if not general.

On the negative side, we continue to be known more as individuals than as a firm, and commissions, though growing larger in themselves, continue to come to individuals rather than to the firm as a whole. If, after four years, this is the rule rather than the exception, we should accept it and capitalize on it.

Opposite
Robin Boyd, Letter to Frederick Romberg 16 November 1970, RMIT Design Archives, donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gift Program in memory of Frederick Romberg and Robin Boyd, 2008. Written after his visit to the School of Architecture at the University of Newcastle, Boyd sketches some ideas for Romberg's City Council Offices in Newcastle.
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Continued



340 ALBERT STREET, MELBOURNE, C.2. 41-5351, 41-5352.

June 23 1970

62

Dear Fredericks

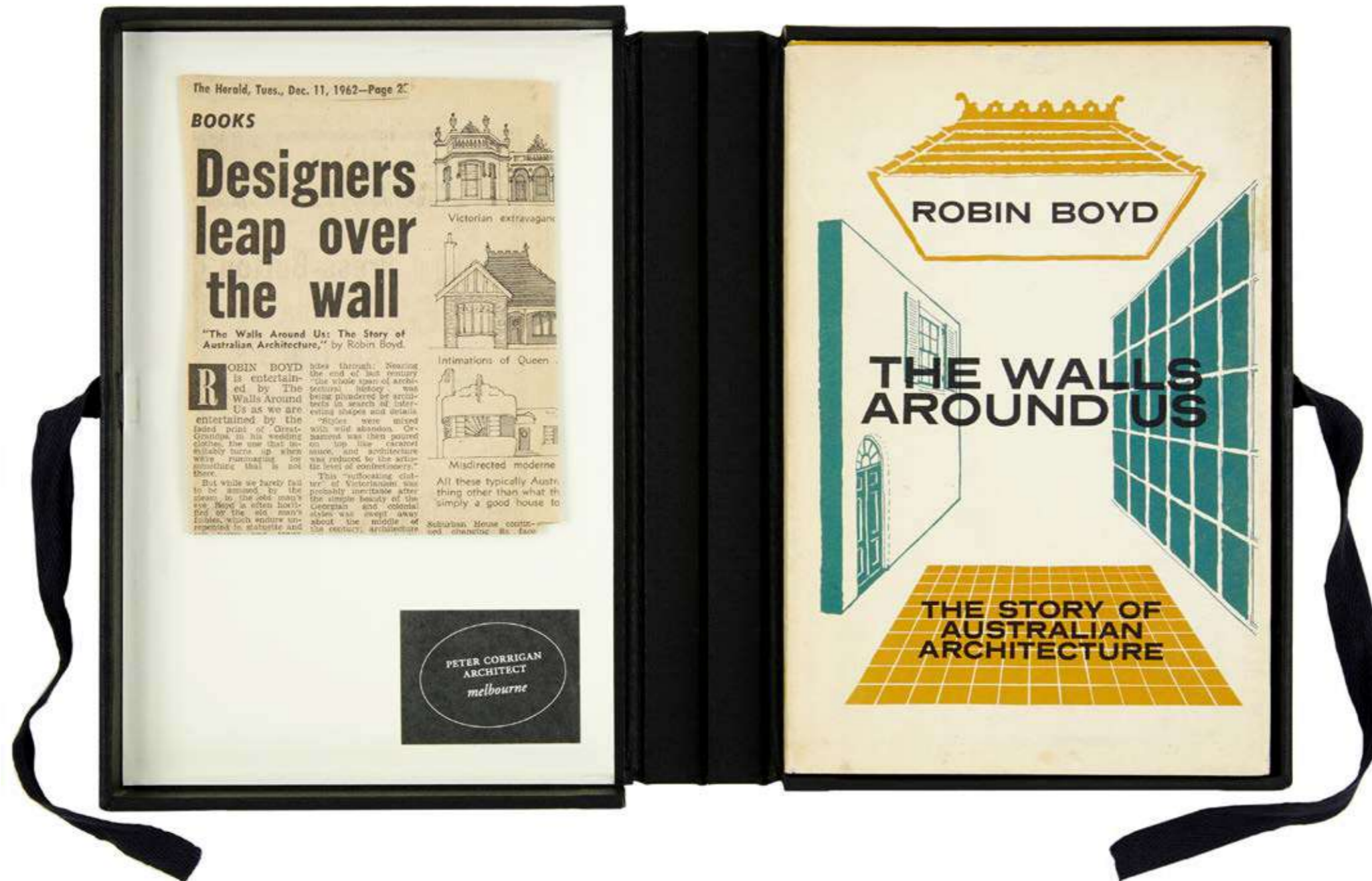
As a desperate ploy to try to exploit the RAIA Gold medal as a job-getter, I have encouraged Mark Strizic to collaborate on a book of pictures + text of my buildings, which of course are mainly houses. Also most are those done under GR&B or R&B names, although I am presenting this as a personal thing. To explain the position to the reader right at the beginning I propose the paragraph attached to this note. Since I take your name in vain in it, I'd be grateful if you would approve, or rewrite it, or tell me what you think should be said.

All best

Boyd

Robin

Continued



Previous Pages

Left
Robin Boyd,
Living in Australia,
afterword David Saunders,
(Rushcutters Bay, NSW:
Pergamon Press, 1970).
RMIT University Library
Special Collection,
Peter Corrigan Collection.
© 2019 Estate of
Robin Boyd, courtesy
Robin Boyd Foundation.
© 2019 Estate of
Mark Strizic

Previous Pages

Right
Robin Boyd, Letter to
Frederick Romberg,
June 23, 1970, donated
through the Australian
Government's Cultural
Gift Program in memory
of Frederick Romberg
and Robin Boyd, 2008.
The letter explains the
original conception of
his book *Living in
Australia*, compiled with
Mark Strizic in 1970.
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Boyd, courtesy Robin
Boyd Foundation.
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This Page

Robin Boyd,
The Walls Around Us,
*The Story of Australian
Architecture told and
illustrated for Young
Readers by Robin Boyd*,
(Melbourne, Vic:
F W Cheshire, 1960),
RMIT University Library
Special Collection,
Peter Corrigan Collection
© 2019 Estate of
Robin Boyd, courtesy
Robin Boyd Foundation

Then in a revealing statement, he summed up:

It is not an overstatement that we are individualists and strong and opposed personalities. I think it is also not an overstatement that, as individuals, we have been trying to get the best of both worlds, - the independence of individuals with the advantages of partnership. In doing so, we have frequently been pulling in opposite directions, with insufficient capacity to compromise. This refers more, I think, to myself that to Robin or Frederick.²⁸

A series of recommendations was put forward. The firm would become a Pty Ltd company with the partners, now directors, forming the company's board along with an accountant and a representative of the shareholders. Each

partner was allocated a sphere of primary activity; Grounds would be responsible for "client contact, promotion, general office administration and finance"; Romberg would be "in charge of the drawing office and production; and Boyd "public relations and publicity". At the same time "each partner should bear an equal share of responsibility for design, production of sketch plans and supervision."²⁹ This division more or less followed the way the office had evolved over the years and the recommendations were accepted. Grounds was, according to Romberg, the obvious choice for client contact and promotion which they all knew lay at the heart of a successful architectural office. For his part, Romberg had confidence in his "ability to design and

produce architectural work” and “since there was a lot to do, I was content to concentrate on this”. Grounds on the other hand “was pretty useless in the drawing room, or even a nuisance” particularly when he started chatting to the staff and disrupting the orderly arrangement of things. According to Romberg, Grounds “never did any drawing himself” except for the initial concept because his creativity lay in producing an image in his mind which he was able to convey to somebody else to put on paper; Paul Wallace being brilliant in this regard. While Boyd matched Grounds in social contacts and “was friends with just about every leading figure in Melbourne’s cultural life, [. . .] they were not necessarily the ones generating jobs”.

If Robin had a failing, especially in the field of supervising drafting staff, it was that he habitually assumed everybody was as brilliant as he. Then also he never seemed to be other than in a hurry. More often than not his instructions were rushed and lacking in detail, which led to all sorts of misunderstandings. But he too liked to do as much drafting himself as he could manage. Unlike Roy, he did his sketch designs in person [and] was a fine draftsman and renderer.³⁰

Romberg’s assessment of the new arrangement highlights the interdependent nature of the partnership. It was based on a division of tasks, not on a division of types of work or clients and it makes clear that the partners could and did work collaboratively.

Conclusion

The letters between the Gromboyd partners written during Boyd’s absence overseas in 1956–57 together with Romberg’s commentary offer insights into the value of attending to correspondence as an integral component of practice history. They uncover the dynamic relationship between the three principals and something of the way their architecture was conceived and put together. The letters preserve not only the voices and thinking of the three principals but also of clients, colleagues and fellow professionals through whose agency their architecture was made.

In his discussion of architecture and its “archival double”, Kent Kleinman observes that architecture exists in two modes, the artefact and its representation.³¹ The latter allows architecture “to be collected, catalogued and protected by archival institutions without having to deal with the messy business of built work”.³² Further, the archive compensates architecture for the latter’s deficiencies, such as being subject to change and the fact that “built work is hardly ever a totalized, authored product; built work has no privileged condition of finality or origin”. It is not the product of “unmediated individual inspiration” and it becomes more compromised and mediated as soon as it leaves the drafting room. The archive on the other hand “promises to stabilize architecture, conferring an ‘aura of originality on artifacts that are at risk of becoming mere commodities, and allows the conceit of authorship to gain a plausible foothold”.³³ Kleinman does not differentiate among archival artefacts in his discussion (sketches, drawings, photographs, correspondence etc.) and there is a suggestion that the archive itself is stable and fixed.

The Gromboyd correspondence however shows this not to be the case and that the archive can do its own share of destabilising.

As Kleinman notes, architecture is not the product of “unmediated individual inspiration” an observation corroborated by the letters discussed here. Throughout the Gromboyd correspondence architecture emerges as fluid and negotiable. The Myer Music Bowl is a case in point. For, if the sequence of letters is to be taken into consideration, then the design of this building was not the unmediated product of Patten’s inspiration as commonly understood, but the outcome of many factors including the initial concept sketch of Boyd, meetings and discussions between both architectural firms and the client during design phase as well as shared design ideas and technical information contributed by Boyd from America.³⁴

Such observations on the role of the archive as a player in architectural history can also be made about Boyd. While a powerful designer Boyd emerges from the archive not as a ‘heroic’ authorial figure but as a practitioner dependent on his partners and the others to realise his buildings. Many of the letters have to do with Boyd’s work which his partners were building or completing. Indeed, in 1963 after the partnership had ended, Grounds wrote to Boyd who had suggested crediting the buildings of the firm to the individual partners:

I don’t like crediting authorship of buildings as you suggest. Among other things, consistency would demand that for anyone who happens to be interested in being accurate or realistic historically, several existing bronze plaques would require recasting.

As I see it, the simple truth is that work done January ’54 to June ’62 was the work of Grounds, Romberg & Boyd.³⁵

This is an important counter-argument to the construction of Boyd as the sole agent of his architectural work. The correspondence shows that design itself is a social practice, born of social engagement with others; it does not materialise in a vacuum. In the centenary year of his birth, Boyd’s approaching stellar status in the Melbourne architectural firmament appears to be hardening into unquestioned fact. A useful corrective to this overly simple view can be found in the archive.

Endnotes

- 1 Conrad Hamann, ‘The architect as public intellectual’, in Rory Hyde, *Future Practice. Conversations from the Edge of Architecture* (Routledge: London 2012), 208.
- 2 ‘The Boyd/Gropius letters’, *Transition* no 38, (1992): 119–134.
- 3 Frederick Romberg changed the family name to Romney in the 1980s.
- 4 Grounds to Romberg, November 6, 1950, letter, RMIT Design Archives, Romney Archive.
- 5 Frederick Romberg, ‘The Gromboyd Letters’, typescript, 8–9, RMIT Design Archives, Romney Archive.
- 6 Serle, *Robin Boyd. A Life*, 145.
- 7 Serle, *Robin Boyd. A Life*, 145.
- 8 Romberg, ‘The Gromboyd Letters’, 12.
- 9 Romberg, ‘The Gromboyd Letters’, 33.
- 10 Serle, *Robin Boyd. A Life*, 145–6.
- 11 For Boyd’s year in America, see Serle, *Robin Boyd. A Life*, 159ff.
- 12 Boyd to Romberg, letter, February 17, 1957, RMIT Design Archives, Romney Archive.
- 13 Romberg to Boyd, letter, February 6, 1957, RMIT Design Archives, Romney Archive.
- 14 Serle, *Robin Boyd. A Life*, 178.
- 15 Serle, *Robin Boyd. A Life*, 178.
- 16 Romberg to Boyd, October 22, 1956 RMIT Design Archives, Romney Archive.
- 17 Romberg to Boyd, October 22, 1956, RMIT Design Archives, Romney Archive.
- 18 Grounds to Boyd, October 26, 1956, RMIT Design Archives, Romney Archive.
- 19 Boyd to Grounds and Romberg, November 14, 1956, RMIT Design Archives, Romney Archive.
- 20 Grounds to Boyd, November, 27, 1956, RMIT Design Archives Romney Archive.
- 21 Boyd to the Gromboyd office, January 31, 1957, RMIT Design Archives, Romney Archive.
- 22 Serle, *Robin Boyd. A Life*, 179.
- 23 Grounds to Boyd, February 13, 1957, RMIT Design Archives, Romney Archive.
- 24 Boyd to Romberg, February 17, 1957, RMIT Design Archives, Romney Archive.
- 25 Romberg to Boyd, May 20, 1957, RMIT Design Archives, Romney Archive.
- 26 Romberg, ‘The Gromboyd Letters’, 135–36, RMIT Design Archives, Romney Archive.
- 27 Romberg, ‘The Gromboyd Letters’, 136 RMIT Design Archives, Romney Archive.
- 28 Romberg, ‘The Gromboyd Letters’, 137, RMIT Design Archives, Romney Archive.
- 29 Romberg, ‘The Gromboyd Letters’, 139, RMIT Design Archives, Romney Archive.
- 30 Romberg, ‘The Gromboyd Letters’, 139 RMIT Design Archives, Romney Archive.
- 31 Kent Kleinman, ‘Archiving/Architecture’, *Archival Science* 1: (2001), 321.
- 32 Kleinman, ‘Archiving/Architecture’, 321.
- 33 Kleinman, ‘Archiving/Architecture’, 322.
- 34 None of this complexity is apparent in a recent assessment of the building, see Kate Gray, ‘Sidney Myer Music Bowl’, in *Australia Modern* eds. Hannah Lewi and Philip Goad (Port Melbourne: Thames & Hudson 2019), 146–7.
- 35 Grounds to Boyd, November 14, 1963, letter, RMIT Design Archives, Romney Archive.

Robin Boyd and Peter Corrigan: archival traces.

Harriet Edquist

As an architecture student at the University of Melbourne in the 1960s, Peter Corrigan kept an eye on Robin Boyd. Small but telling traces of the connection between the two architects can be found in the Edmond and Corrigan Archive, shelved only a few metres away from the Frederick Romberg and Robin Boyd collection, in the RMIT Design Archives. They set up a conversation.

ROMBERG AND BOYD, ARCHITECTS, 340 ALBERT STREET, MELBOURNE, C.2 *41-5351

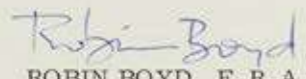
RB/SS

November 22nd, 1965.

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

I am pleased to support Peter Corrigan's application.

My personal contacts with him have been few, but over the years I have noticed his name recurring frequently in connection with student affairs: as the editor of a little critical paper, as a set designer of student reviews and plays, as a spokesman for students, and most importantly of course as a working architectural student of high quality. His extra-curricula activities never seemed to interfere with his real work but gave, I imagine, more scope for his nonconformist imagination than he found in a school of architecture's drafting room. He strikes me as a dedicated, serious-minded young man with ambition of the right kind and a strong streak of originality which if properly cultivated could lead to great things.



ROBIN BOYD, F. R. A. I. A., Hon. Fell. A. I. A.

Three documents Corrigan preserved from the 1960s suggest that he considered Boyd's opinion of value to his career. Firstly, there is the edition of *Smudges* Corrigan edited in November 1961. As Geoffrey Serle notes, the origins of *Smudges* "are lost in elderly men's memories" but it was founded by Boyd and Roy Simpson who co-edited the first issue; Boyd was thereafter sole editor for three years and today is probably the architect most commonly associated with the pamphlet.¹ That Corrigan assumed the editorship indicates that even as a student he was moving towards a conception of architecture that went beyond building, towards the idea of the architect as a performer, as a public figure, like Boyd.

At the same time however, as Patrick McCaughey recalls in his 2003 memoir, Corrigan's meeting with Boyd as a critic in his second-year design studio in 1962 did not go well. Boyd, moving through the students' work 'briskly and without sentimentality', stopped in front of Corrigan's, noted that it demonstrated a 'real architectural idea' but if built could do with improvement. This faint criticism proved too much for Corrigan, a 'full-scale row' erupted and he had to be 'physically restrained from carrying it further'.² He apologised to the Boyds the following day.³

In 1965 as he was planning to undertake post-graduate study in the United States, Corrigan gathered together a batch of references from his lecturers at Melbourne University. He also approached Boyd for a reference, and Boyd wrote, with good humour and no doubt vivid memories, that while he had few contacts with Corrigan, he had followed his career with interest, noting his extra-curricular activities, his nonconformism and 'strong streak of originality which if properly cultivated could lead to great things'.⁴

Two years later, from Yale, Corrigan sent Boyd a copy of Robert Venturi's ground-breaking book *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966). In his responding letter Boyd acknowledged his interest in Venturi's book but not in Venturi's architecture which was included at the back of the book. How wrong this view turned out to be. In his Introduction to the 1977 second edition of *Complexity and Contradiction* which contained a sustained comparison between Venturi and Le Corbusier, Vincent Scully noted:

... Venturi's ideas have so far stirred bitterest resentment among the more academic-minded of the Bauhaus generation - with its utter lack of irony, its spinsterish disdain for the popular culture but shaky grasp on any other, its incapacity to deal with monumental scale, its lip service to technology, and its preoccupation with a rather prissily puristic aesthetic.⁵

The generational battle lines were drawn. Boyd died in 1971 but the gulf between him and the younger generation was already emergent in that 1967 letter. In his Foreword to the 1985 edition of *Australia's Home*, Corrigan tempered his admiration of Boyd with questions about his conception of suburbia. He wrote:

the ambivalence towards suburbia evident in this book is no longer shared by a new generation of architects and artists. . . The point now is to accept Boyd's suburbia as a site for dealing with questions of human existence. These Australian homes are not aesthetic calamities; they can and do nourish an imaginative world and constitute a region for the spirit.⁶

Back again in 2010 to comment on the republication of *The Australian Ugliness*, Corrigan's observations were not so benign. As a student he recalled, he had disliked the book for its 'shrill tone' and 'life denying drumbeat of negativity'. Now he believed:

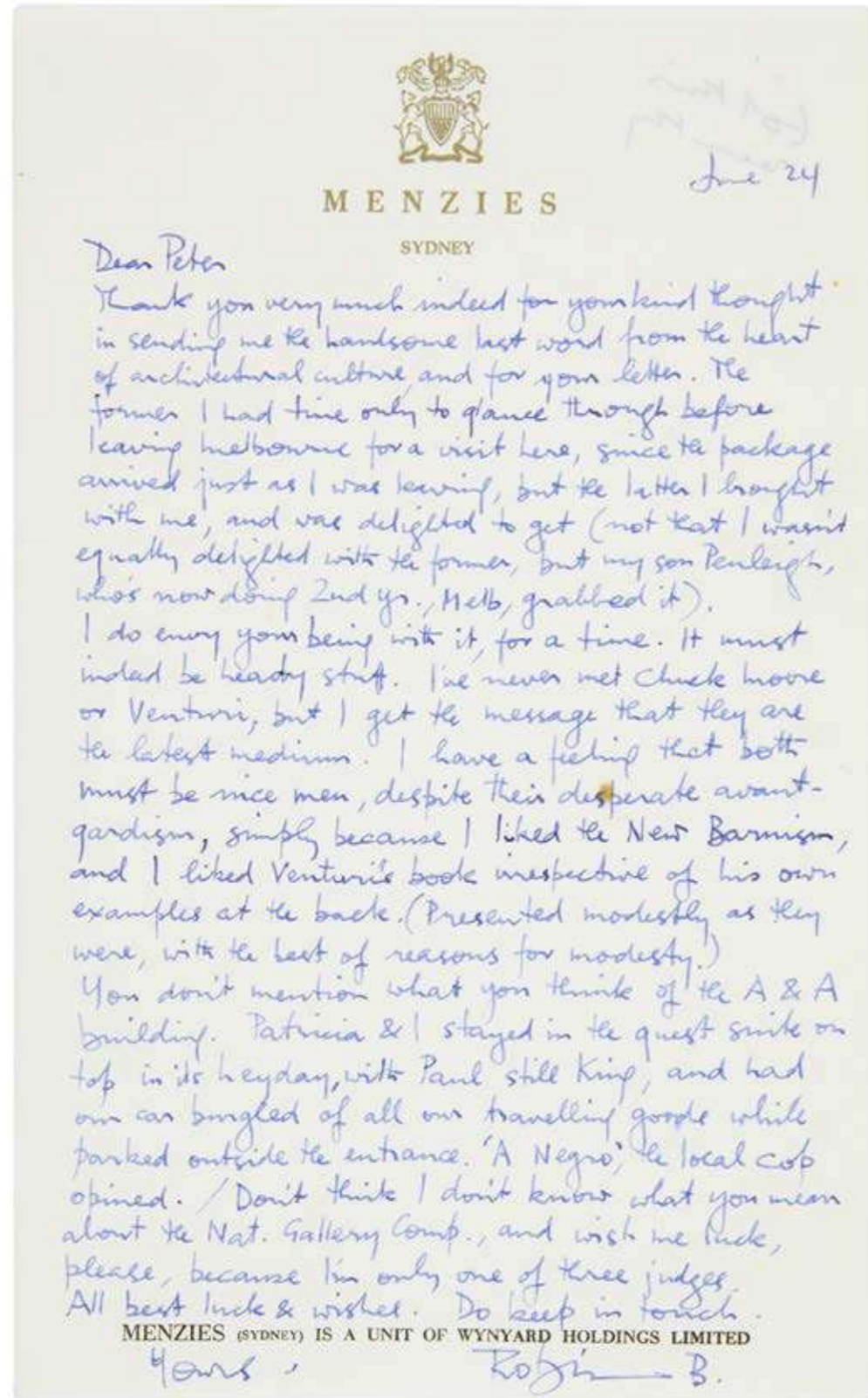
"featurism" is not an issue (if it ever was) it is assumed. We accept that, today the found condition usually has some validity, some authority. What is there now is for the most part, there for a reason. No longer can we bully the city or the suburbs into our own desires. The present condition teaches us where the pressure points are. And they are usually not aesthetic.

And he concluded his talk by noting that the appearance of Australian cities is 'neither ugly nor beautiful, but it is simply a window onto our world. Through this window we observe the evidence of lives. This is Australia. It is ours'.⁷

- 1 Geoffrey Serle, *Robin Boyd. A Life*, 48.
- 2 Patrick McCaughey, *Bright shapes and true names: a memoir* (Melbourne: Text Publishing 2003): 55.
- 3 Maggie Edmond alerted me to this account in McCaughey's book.
- 4 Robin Boyd, reference for Peter Corrigan, 22 November 1965, RMIT Design Archives, Edmond and Corrigan Archive.
- 5 Vincent Scully, 'Introduction', in Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art second edition 1977, reprinted 1985): 11.
- 6 Peter Corrigan, Foreword to *Australia's Home*, typescript notes July 1985, RMIT Design Archives, Edmond and Corrigan Archive ©2019 Maggie Edmond.
- 7 Peter Corrigan, typescript notes 26 October 2010 for talk at 290 Walsh Street South Yarra, RMIT Design Archives, Edmond and Corrigan Archive ©2019 Maggie Edmond.

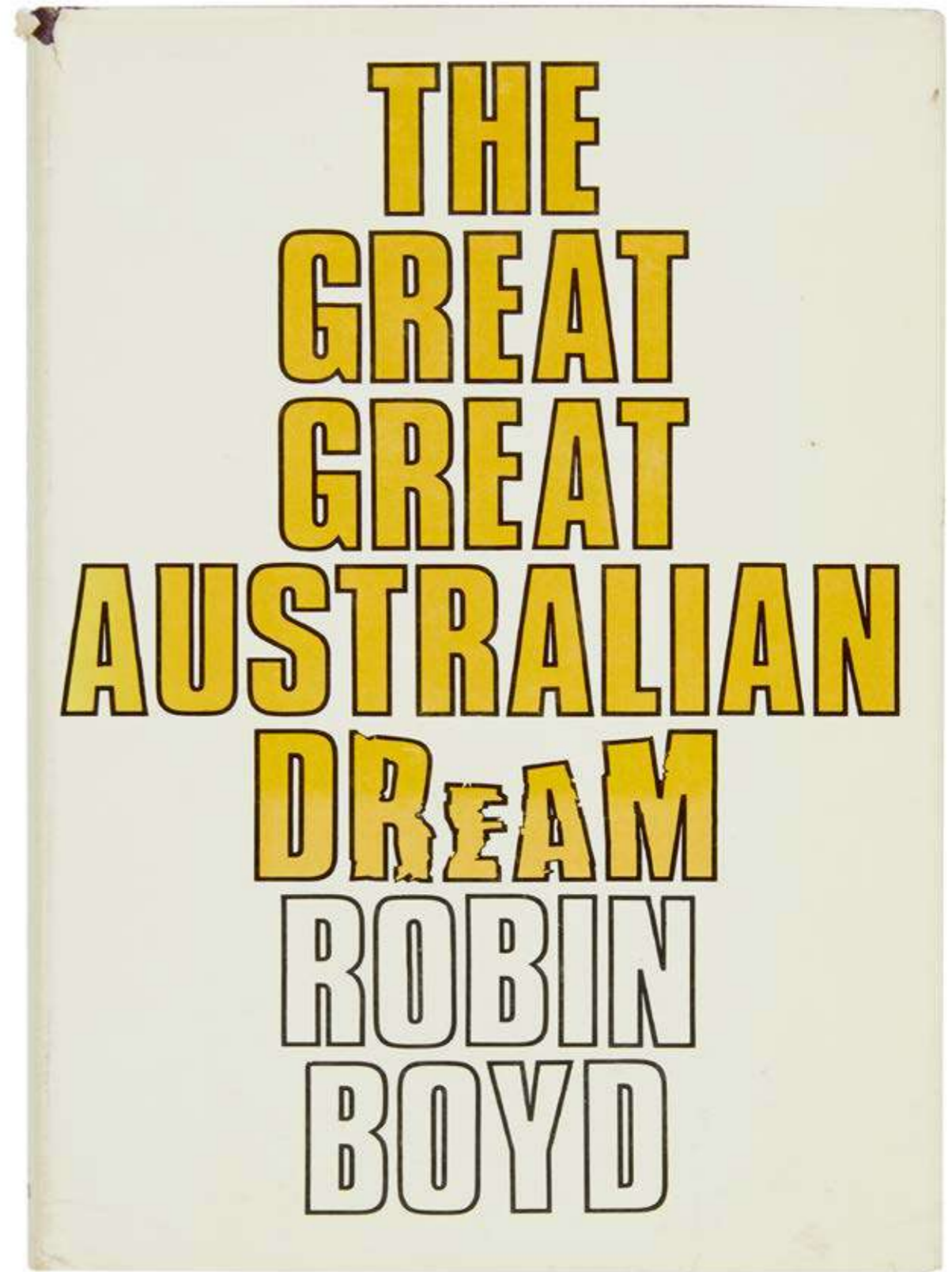
Opposite
Robin Boyd, 'To Whom It May Concern', Reference for Peter Corrigan, 22 November 1965, RMIT Design Archives, Edmond and Corrigan Collection, © 2019 Estate of Robin Boyd, courtesy Robin Boyd Foundation, © 2019 Maggie Edmond

Continued



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Robin Boyd,
Letter to Peter Corrigan,
June 24, c. 1967, RMIT
Design Archives, Edmond
and Corrigan Collection,
© 2019 Estate of Robin
Boyd, courtesy Robin
Boyd Foundation.
© 2019 Maggie Edmond

Opposite
Robin Boyd,
*The Great Great Australian
Dream*, (Rushcutters Bay,
NSW: Pergamon Press
Australia, 1972),
RMIT Design Archives,
Roy Simpson Collection.
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Boyd, courtesy Robin
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This Page

RMIT Design Archives,
Open House Melbourne 2019

Photography by Vicki Jones



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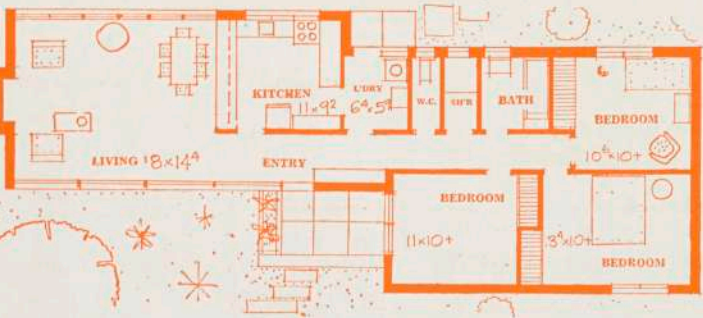
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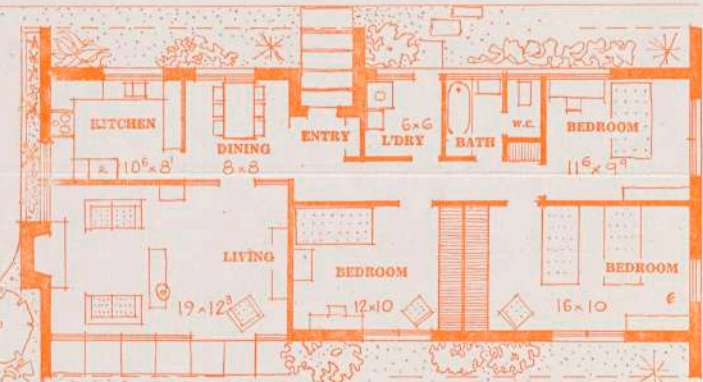
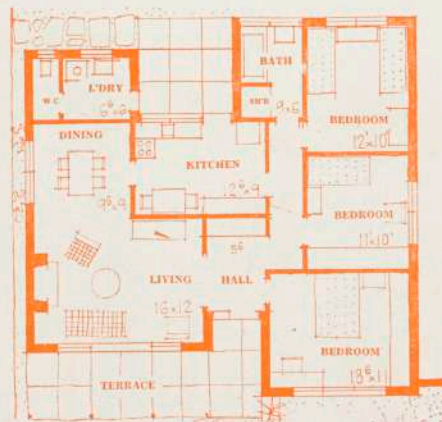


V327 A long, low ranch house which can either fit on a very wide (80') block or down a narrow (minimum 35') block. This house has been successfully built in Melbourne. It has a large livingroom and at least a wing wall should divide kitchen and laundry. The third bedroom could serve as a study. The low-pitched roof in asbestos cement, aluminium or tile could be extended down to form a car port as part of the design of the house. 11½ squares. Current estimate £3350.



This 5½-roomed house provides accommodation generally required by a majority of home builders. Bedrooms are ample, plumbing areas are well grouped for economy, w.c. compartment being off the laundry could be used for septic closet installation. Eating space is provided in the kitchen and a combined living-diningroom is also included, 12 squares, it will fit on a 50' block. Current estimate £3250.

V334

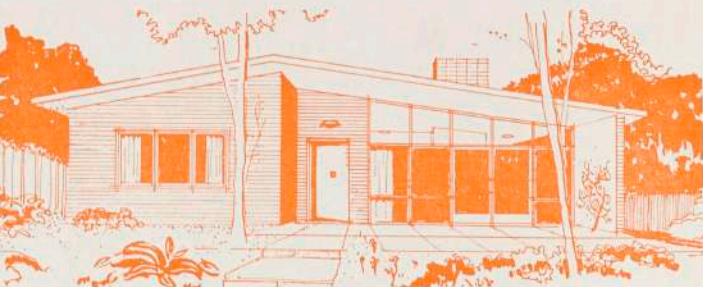


V329 On a narrow block facing east, this house would get the northern sun into the livingroom and two bedrooms. If used on a wide block, north should be at the rear. The bedrooms are generous and the dining arrangement is unusual. The house is roofed with one simple gable, preferably low-pitched. 11½ squares, current estimate £3300.



This house is a contemporary version of V334. Its skillion roof would be ideal for one of the new patented steel roofs which are fixed by the manufacturers and therefore very suitable to be used by owner-builders. This plan contains the most popular bathroom arrangement. The shower recess is separate from the bath and the w.c. is off but has an additional external doorway, the basin is set in a bench top. Just over 12 squares it will fit on 50' block or across 55'. With the alternative placing a different position for the trades entrance should be considered. Current estimate £3400.

V337



modern roof treatment as this well-known and popular plan up to date. A terrace is enclosed by a wing of the front roof and a small open terrace is formed by two rear projections either side of the kitchen. Easy access is provided to w.c. The house is 12½ squares and is suitable for...



A triple-fronted three-bedroomed house, although old-fashioned, this particular version has a modern feature of a front view from the kitchen...

