Contributors

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We acknowledge the people of the eastern Kulin Nations on whose unceded lands we conduct our business and respectfully acknowledge their Ancestors and Elders, past and present. 

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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 exhibitions.

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 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 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 1947-1985. 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 “sustained 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 distress 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 insist 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 emigré architects. Goad’s analysis adds to the historical contextualisation and critical scrutiny undertaken by all writers in this special issue.
Robin Boyd: Continued
1947–70

6.30pm on 21 September 1961. It brought together a number of Australian cities” was broadcast at “tea” time, and Australian historian Manning Clark and University of ABC. These scripts were a collaboration between Boyd Clark, Robin Boyd appeared on television, with a three- illustrated and written by Boyd himself, with assistance from several collaborators, including George Dreyfus and Stan Ostrin-Korotki. The radio transmissions were published as a small pamphlet titled Artificial Australia in 2010 show that while he still clearly admired Boyd 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 frequency 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 spacky 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 Manning 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

Networks
Other media formats, notably, influential international architectural journals such as the English The Architectural Review, provided Boyd with a rich source of ideas 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 highway, electricity, water and sewage. Boyd like a number of key international architects, became more interested in new media during the 1960s. Christine Phillips and Peter Raebuck’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 Melbourne, and with composer George Dreyfus and artist Stan Ostrin-Korotki at Osaka. In these presentations multi-media happenings were used to present narratives of the Australian way of life and of Australian cultural and economic modernity. The multi-media presentations at international exhibitions 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 Grosvenor, editors of Architectural Review 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. Corrigan темpers 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 houses are not aesthetic calamities; they can and do nourish an imaginative world and constitute a region for the spirit.”
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 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.

**Context**

In September 1945, one month after the end of the war, Robin Boyd was discharged from the Australian Army, where he had served as a draughtsman stationed in Port Moresby.1 Aged 26, Boyd was eager to dive into his career, returning to Melbourne with a reserve of pent up energy and ideas, all of which would be released over the next few years of intense production.

The war, and the depression of the 1930s that preceded it, had left a huge shortfall in housing in Melbourne. After 1948, the city would open up, reaching beyond the old core to lay out the new subdivisions of Glen Iris, Coburg, Greensborough, Moorabbin, and Altona. Divided into quarter-acre blocks, these cleared rectangles of grassland came 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.

Buying the land was the easy part. In this rush to build, the quality of homes was neglected, as jerry builders filled the gap left by a shortage of skilled labour. A difficulty further compounded by problems acquiring materials, and wartime restrictions on their use, which prescribed the maximum 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.

**Foundation**

It was not the first service to offer standard plans to address the challenges of single-family housing. As Boyd himself would later outline in *Australia’s Home and Comfort*, Melbourne’s Freehold Land Society proposed an experimental service offering a choice of six designs, comprising full architectural drawings, specifications and bills of quantities in 1885, “hoping that the colony generally will be benefited by the stimulus … of better design, especially in the suburbs.”2 In 1927, the Institute of Architects of New South Wales established the Small House Plan Service Bureau, but was thwarted by the depression.

“Heedless of the trail of unsuccessful bureaux”, Boyd wrote, “the Victorian Institute decided on one more attempt to save the public from itself.”3 The Small Homes Service of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects was born in July 1947. Boyd was appointed as director, despite his young age and relative lack of experience in building. Neil Clearch, who would serve as Boyd’s assistant, reflected that “It seemed, more than luck, more like a miracle, that he was chosen to set up and head the Service.”4

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 site 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.
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.” 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 Cleerehan, “was the main reason for the Small Homes Service’s initial and continuing success.”

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. 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 Plan”, 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 — “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 sales 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. “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.
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 Windowall that Boyd, more than any other single architect, gave our suburbs a distinctive look," wrote Cleathran. "Even Palladio couldn't do that." 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." 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" of the Australian male would prefer to fit a medical association offering forceps for sale for home surgery", wrote Boyd, echoing a common complaint that architects were "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 paintings but were able to buy reproductions, who could not afford original 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. 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. 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 literary 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 mediæval England. 'It must return', they used to say, 'it's in the blood of our people'." 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 appearance." In this shacks and sheds, cruelly 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." 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 individualism. "In a land of the free, the houses of the free were narrow, straight-lined, smug", Boyd stepped...
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 Clearchan. 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 suburban 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 educational being 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?” 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.” 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.” 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 family beyond the trees luring them to the gay life only a minute away.” Boyd glimpses this reality in a two-bedroom flat in a high-rise tower, a view of a park, and spreading parkland, set back from the busy road, offered a place for children to play and neighbours to meet. But 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 Daryl Yencken, Graeme Dunlop, and John Ridge in 1965. Like the shs, Merchant Builders offered standard plans for suburban lots, to which 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 beam, Mr. Ridge” read an ad promoting the company’s architectural hardware, and “Quite a beam, Mr. Ridge” for their attention to structure. 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.” The Small Homes Service, and its successors, would seek to guide the direction of the suburbs toward quality, clarity, community, and openness. It was hoped these values would then rub off on those who lived there, to instil an enlightened culture where it was felt to be lacking. But these ambitions were overwhelmed by the scale of the suburbs, which grew...
and grew unabated, the pale-yellow staid 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 core, beyond the reach of the sewers or electricity, are now considered convenient, rising in value. As families expanded and aspirated 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 of 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, those new Melburnians 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 dearth of affordable housing and 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 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

4 Boyd, Australia’s Home, 275.
6 Boyd, Australia’s Home, 275.
7 Chisholm, “The Age”, 54.
11 Chisholm, “The Age”, 60.
14 Boyd, Australia’s Home, 276.
15 Boyd, Australia’s Home, 276.
16 Serle, Robin Boyd, 12.
17 Boyd, Australia’s Home, 227.
18 Boyd, Australia’s Home, 232.
19 Boyd, Australia’s Home, 291.
21 Boyd, Australia’s Home, 280.
22 Boyd, Australia’s Home, 282.
23 Boyd, Australia’s Home, 284.
27 I am grateful to Alan Pert for drawing my attention to this article.
28 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/trada/news/articles/2018/small-homes-service
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 polemical writings.

In mid-winter 1946 a prototype house was erected and exhibited in Melbourne’s Treasury Gardens. 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 Ministry for Housing, the Department of Aircraft Production and the Victorian Housing Commission opened the exhibition to great fanfare.1 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.2 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.3

That tale is not the story of the Small Homes Service, which was founded around the same time, but of a scheme destined to fail within two years of its public unveiling.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.5

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.6 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.7 Although 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 overcome.8 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 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.9

The design of the Beaufort House was influenced by another project that was dominated by political activism and architectural bureau.10 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.11 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. 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 overcome. 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 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. 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. 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 overcome. 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 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. 
The Beaufort's demise was a source of real concern for Boyd, who observed that “the small homes movement on the topic more than one occasion. A year after its closure, a still-frustrated Boyd authored an article entitled “4 Interim Statements: A Reappraisal on an Anniversary.” 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 worked, writing:

“We cancelled it because, when it came to the point, we were frightened by the prospect. We preferred the brick and trowel, the hammer and nail — the tried, true, 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.”

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 focused 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 distress 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

Where the Beaufort House relied on convincing an individual home buyer of the benefits of the product, the Small Homes Service made a more public service approach, seeking to attract and retain a readership, many of whom would have been around the same age as Boyd and he responds directly, or even more pointedly, to the later years.

The title of the article suggests active participation from the audience, the Small Homes Service being given a voice that was often absent in the technical publications of the time. Boyd’s use of the title “The People Choose a House” reflects the democratic mandate of the Service, and its emphasis on dialogue, its role as a means by which the public could be involved in the decision-making process. This approach is in stark contrast to the Beaufort prototype’s more passive role, where the reader was left to make their own decisions without much guidance or support. Boyd’s use of the title also highlights the Service’s focus on the rights of the consumer, and its commitment to providing clear, accurate and easily understandable information about housing options.

The title of the article also suggests that the Service’s approach was more participatory than the Beaufort’s, which focused more on the technical aspects of housing design. The Service’s approach was more collaborative, involving the public in the decision-making process through the publication of columns and articles that encouraged readers to participate in the planning and design of their homes. This approach was in line with the Service’s goal of making housing more accessible and affordable to all Australians, and of providing a platform for public participation in shaping the future of housing in Australia.

The built work of the Small Homes Service is revealed as a partially completed and highly modified record. Understandable however, students walked those suburban streets and mapped remains and识. 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 first-hand 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 exhibition 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 finished, flipped or modified by their builders, and original material (plans, specifications, receipts and photos). The number of methods and material techniques employed by the students was aimed at better communicating the linked and interrogated 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 providing a platform for a wider readership. Audiences were actively encouraged to post questions and responses to columns, and occasionally newly built homes were revisited as 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 “People of the House.”

The title of the article suggests active participation from the column’s readers, as by poll. Boyd later explains the plan had far exceeded any other attempts to achieve the “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.
If it was a Saturday morning sometimes it could be ten people in there. And 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 down in the office and they would put up a cloth to keep the light out and they would sit down and open up the plans, they would put the plans on the rail and have a look at them. This wasn’t a very big space and they wanted to have this timber desk along, so that they could put out their blueprints.

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 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 re-assuring 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. As Boyd writes: “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. 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 Burwood houses, whose few remaining examples exist as noted artefacts of heritage significance possibly because they represent a defined, bounded and therefore protected object.”
 existed as an object ready to burst 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 decided 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 real-world 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 inscription 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 and varied potential of this discussion. This sentiment gradually united the overall exhibition conception and design.

The class also produced a part-imagined/past-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 again, where potential home builders could discuss the Small Homes Service plans to newspaper column and then back to the radio interview audio, allowing the exhibited home to ‘speak’.

The Small Homes Service was a direct response to a moribund private housing market. 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 Gerevski; Peter McLennan, and Tony Lee.

Students


Charlotte Day, Virginia Manning, Naomi Stood

8 The Small Homes Service had its own calling system for each plan type, with the first letter indicating material (e.g., ‘T’ for timber, ‘V’ for veneer) and then the first digit indicating the number of bedrooms.
13 The Small Homes Service had its own calling system for each plan type, with the first letter indicating material (e.g., ‘T’ for timber, ‘V’ for veneer) and then the first digit indicating the number of bedrooms.
15 Student interview with the Dennis Family, Melbourne, April 5, 2019.
17 Robin Boyd, A House Divided.
21 Student interview with Richard (Dick) Morgan.
23 Student interview with Beatrice Wilkinson, Melbourne, April 1, 2019.
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 Dennis Family, Melbourne, April 5, 2019.
Robin Boyd, Meanjin and the problem of culture, 1948–1961
Karen Burns

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. 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. 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. 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 underaddressed. However, writers on Australian cultural studies have briefly noted his place in the formation of Australian culture as a set of timeless ideals, of culture as the common man — school teachers, students, writers and would-be writers, a cross-section of middle-class people. However the list of subscribers comprised mainly academics and wealthy businessmen. 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.” Meanjin and Boyd engaged the three general definitions of culture identified by Williams: 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. 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”. 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”.[13] 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 “unashamedly competent work resulting
from long practice”. It was “a form of middle of the road caution.”20 Bow obviously borrowed the concept from John Betjeman’s Ghastly Good Taste (1931), a survey of the rise and fall of English architecture. The English Architectural Review for whom Boyd began writing in 1935, also continued Betjeman’s campaign against “good taste.”21 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 subjection grounded in agonism and alienation.22 Meurip’s oppositional framing was framed by the vision of the embattled creative artist. In the 1941 Report from the Arts and Letters Enquiry Committee, Meurip 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.”23 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.24 Meurip’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 portrait 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.”25 In this vision of the critical minority Meurip echoed the phrase famously wrought by English literary critic F. R. Leavis in his Mass Civilization 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.”26

Through the 1950s Leavis was the “house-muse” of the University of Melbourne English Department.27 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.”28 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 mindset.

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.29 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.30 Describing the arrival of each successive wave of style imported from overseas, Boyd noted, “Taste changed slowly at first.”31 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.32 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.”33 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 affected 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
trained art historian and Melbourne University art history lecturer Franco Fitzpatrick, published in Melbourne University Press.39

In the “Politics” chapter, the intersection of government 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 interwry between the writing of Australia’s Home, and The Australian Utopian 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

In holding fast to the dream of an organic community, Boyd set 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 manorialist communal society. 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 his own organic art work as a tool of “social management”, an instrument for shaping subjectivity, of culture as an instrument for shaping subjectivity.

F. R. Leavis opened his 1930 book Culture and Anarchy.51 He derided films “a practice of passive indulgence, of oral heritage in literature.48 Words he asserted, were “an article on the need for ’Angry Young Architects’ in澳洲 in the 1950s. His “Look Back in Apathy”49 piece in this decade. His “Look Back in Apathy”...
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, Slesser'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 Slesser greater than the opportunity he has so powerfully seized in 'Five Bells'? Despite the charity of the critics, he is not really an 'intellectual' poet. It is true that he has eschewed the easy path of Georgian manner 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 Slesser'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 hat 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 few of architects take their work very seriously, even in the extent of approaching the problems of building at times with a somewhat precious attitude which would revolt, 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-staking-in-a-galler of this country, and enough frustration results to fascinate any psychiatrist is prevalent today 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...
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 ethic s” 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 the group proposed by his friend Daryl Lindsay the Director of the National Gallery of Victoria.”

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.” 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. The journal published a number of articles on the “mounting assault on civil rights” as one writer observed when chronicling the “history” on American radio. One contributor argued in 1953 that “freedom of controversy” is “s the natural beauty 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 1950’s “destroyed too much of the natural beauty around our cities.”

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. 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 thirldly “to save, and where possible restore the historic and aesthetic aspect of Melbourne and its environs.” Municipal philistinism was faced with speculative development as key agents of destruction. Once more the oppositional world view derived from the avant-garde paradigms could be used to capture diverse destroyers of culture.

The Meanjin world view permeates The Australian Ugliness in Boyd’s leftist derision of nine-teenth century materialism. Thomas glossed this historical context by observing that, “Prosperity only brought a kind of Neo-Victorianism”. However, he also praised 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)”. 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 Flaubertian”, 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 Preciousness”, a land of “multi-coloured park benches, the over-tidy suburban...
garden, 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 decided 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.” Sentimental value he declared, “is always non-art value.” 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.” In The Australian Ugliness Boyd catalogued the Australian homemaker’s satisfaction with veneer and cosmetic effects.

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 Austeria. “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 copy. 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 culture of the copy. 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.” Thomas echoed Boyd by observing that “Architecture can only flourish by dismissing the essential unreal concept of beauty.” 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 counterfeits.” Levin’s vision of the hypnotising effects of culture was fused with the Archaic 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.” Boyd’s ferocious rhetoric and attacks on the Australian way of life could be interpreted 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 fulfill 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.” 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.


11. Main Casey on East Melbourne resident published her book Early Melbourne Architecture in 1951, with Joan Lindsay and others. It was probably the agent for this meeting.

12. State Library of Victoria, Grounds, Romberg and Boyd Archives, MS 13363, Box 122.


15. Lynne Strahan, Just City and the Mirrors, 84.


22. The terms left and right are controversially slippery and derived historically from the French Revolution but left wing in the post-war period is best defined as “allied to the idea of historical and social progress” see Willis Thompson, The Left in History: Revolution and Reform in Twentieth-Century Britain (London: Paris Press, 1977), 5.


34. Boyd, Australia’s Home, 43.

35. Boyd, Australia’s Home, 44.


37. Boyd, Australia’s Home, 47.


40. Boyd, Australia’s Home, 53.

41. Boyd, Australia’s Home, 53.

42. Boyd, Australia’s Home, 53.

43. Boyd, Australia’s Home, 53.

44. Boyd, Australia’s Home, 53.

45. Boyd, Australia’s Home, 53.

46. Boyd, Australia’s Home, 53.

47. Boyd, Australia’s Home, 53.


49. Boyd, Australia’s Home, 53.


52. Boyd, Australia’s Home, 53.


54. Boyd, Australia’s Home, 53.


57. Boyd, Australia’s Home, 53.

58. Boyd, Australia’s Home, 53.


60. Boyd, Australia’s Home, 53.


63. Boyd, Australia’s Home, 53.

64. Boyd, Australia’s Home, 53.


68. Boyd, Australia’s Home, 53.


70. Boyd, Australia’s Home, 53.


73. Boyd, Australia’s Home, 53.

74. Boyd, Australia’s Home, 53.

75. Boyd, Australia’s Home, 53.

76. Boyd, Australia’s Home, 53.

77. Boyd, Australia’s Home, 53.

78. Boyd, Australia’s Home, 53.
Robin Boyd and the Vernacular
Philip Goad

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 *The Victorian Type* (1962) is a representative in a line of thought that has been, however, a world of oversimplification. The Vernacular architecture has provided the longest in-depth study of this type and conforms to Paul Oliver’s definition of the so-called ‘functional tradition’, indicative more of visual taste and aligned to a designer’s eye (largely 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 builder’s 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 Memott and his colleagues at the University of Queensland and most prominently by Memott’s *Gunyah, goondie + wurley: the Aboriginal architecture of Australia* (2017). More recently, Mirjana Lonovski 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. 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 1948, Walker Burning 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
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 dogs, and 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 fade of luxury, the gunnies retreating before the swelling town.1

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 Selheim’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.2

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.3

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.”4 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

fronted huts.5 He also acknowledged that the white man “took their word ‘humpy’ into his language to describe a bush hut.”6 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.”7 In doing so, the trope of unaffected, functional construction that echoes throughout Australia’s Home emanates not from the sophisticated essentials 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 culture, 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.”8 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 rock” or “huts of eckle” or “on
Robin Boyd and
Continued

The Great Asymmetrical Front (which would become a major theme of Australia’s Home some five years later), Boyd’s account of a concrete water tower in Echuca (“the most functionally satisfying structure in the town”), a hotel in Creswick, and an unidentified haystack, each exemplifying the “Vic Type” in each other state.38

The next page, he used vertically arranged photographs of four gable-roofed houses each with attendant landscapes, showing · 1860 infancy (a house south of Geelong), · 1870 childhood (a former hotel near Bendigo), · 1920 growing pains (a Griffin-repeating of terrace houses in Armadale), and · 1961 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 unpioneered development of the suburban vernacular.29 In short, the rural vernacular had been refined by the architect (in this case, Griffin and Mockridge) and developed as the preferred ‘Victorian Type.’

In fact we have not often shown much more native ingenuity than the aborigine in our efforts at adapting to the styles of the old world.19

The Victorian style started in ordered simplicity: the ‘pictorial development of “The Great Asymmetrical Front”, just as the early and rural vernacular of colonial settlement made a reappearance in Chapter 6, ‘The Innocent Era’: …Australia habitually economizes on the fortieth phase of any production. Herein lies the secret and the desire of the builders to get back to the goldfields with the least possible delay.33

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’,30 in short, Boyd is acknowledging the development of a national architectural language, which has since been proven largely untrue given research by James Broadbent and Stuart King. Many of the larger country houses and homesteads dated from the 1830s (sixth edition: “Sydney and Hobart’s Settlement, Boyd also argues that “Sydney and Hobart’s Settlement, Boyd also argues that “Sydney and Hobart’s Settlement, Boyd also argues that “Sydney and Hobart’s Settlement, Boyd also argues that “Sydney and Hobart’s Settlement, Boyd also argues that “Sydney and Hobart’s Settlement, Boyd also argues that “Sydney and Hobart’s Settlement, Boyd also argues that “Sydney and Hobart’s Settlement, Boyd also argues that “Sydney and Hobart’s Settlement, Boyd also argues that “Sydney and Hobart’s Settlement...” would be the case for the “Vic Type”, but only after Boyd’s sinusoidal curve of “Primitives”, “Pioneers”, “Opulents”, “Decadents”, “Prophets” (Walker 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 Australia from 1920 to 1947. In Australia’s Home, Boyd narrates the history of domestic architecture (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 (1946-60), Sydney Ancher’s English House, St Ives, NSW (1952) 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 Room period of the 1860s 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 having featured in his 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 supervised or prescribed by the Architector, the Architect Type, and eventually by some indigenous variation of the Type in each other state. In short, Boyd is acknowledging the development of a vernacular ‘developed’ by the speculative builder who

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 those were not impressive people, but between them they all produced buildings of simple dignity and repose. As a matter of fact a number of non-architects – untrained farmers, builders and others – were building with a style and competence not surpassed by many architects in the next hundred years.31

By which, Boyd means the 1930s (originally the same decade in which he described 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’.32

For while each of Boyd’s four books has a 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 suburban vernacular. 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” (Walker 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 narrates the history of domestic architecture (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 (1946-60), Sydney Ancher’s English House, St Ives, NSW (1952) 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 Room period of the 1860s 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 having featured in his 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 supervised or prescribed by the Architector, the Architect Type, and eventually by some indigenous variation of the Type in each other state. In short, Boyd is acknowledging the development of a vernacular ‘developed’ by the speculative builder who
nursed the all-Australian house throughout its growth" that will be a parallel narrative to the suburban vernacular design polemic into his history of the suburban vernacular. He is not content with disparagingly 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 Stylist" form a wallpaper-like cover interrupted only by the book's title and a red square that highlights a terra cotta kangaroo gargoyl 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 Lloyd Wright's signature red square that was embossed onto 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.45

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 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 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 builders', 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 concealing.

...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.46 Such a statement confirms a subtext 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.
Migrant Vernacular

At the same time, of the migrant vernacular house as it developed in the 1950s and indeed migrants generally, Boyd reserved his mention to those qualified as architects, and even then their output is described by Bates, notably in Victorian Modern by Frederick Romberg, Anatol Kagan and Blumin; in Australia and by 1957, the comic novel, It’s a Weird Mob (1952) by Robin Boyd, A. O. Nankivell Collection, catalogue for the exhibition presented by the Industrial Design Council of Australia, Australia Square, (Sydney, Australia, 1962), 1.

Australia’s Home. Except that Boyd adds the humour of Oskar Lanctot with his own drawings and playful graphic design, the wit of John Betjeman, and in both Victorian Modern and The Walls Around Us a very realist historiographical and photographic advice as an architect as to how the design direction of domestic architecture might head. In short, Boyd appears to mirror the intention of Richards’s message about the vernacular but without the everyday 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.

Yet – given the advent of Pop and postmodern inclusion – one needs to be wary of Boyd’s confident historic statements, especially in Australia’s Home. There, the final words to the preface to the 1962 edition, that “This is the story of a material triumph and an aesthetic calamity,” openly reveal the not-so-subtle subject 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, becoming the site of design leadership in the nation’s burgeoning suburban expansion. The legacy of Boyd’s prescriptive writing was three-fold: first, architects in the 1960s became involved in the design leadership in the nation’s building boom; second, the rural vernacular, used as a polychromatic prop in each text, would be taken up by other architects (as well as Boyd but in buildings not writing?*) in the 1960s in 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 vision, and aesthetic and historical 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.

6 Helen Bond, Residential Housing in Australia, (Sydney: Wi Nib Nia, 1943), 140.
8 Boyd, Victoria Modern, 8.
10 Boyd, Australia’s Home, 12.
11 Boyd, Australia’s Home, 12.
12 Boyd, Australia’s Home, 12.
19 The first 200 years, catalogue for the exhibition presented by the Industrial Design Council of Australia, Australia Square, Sydney, New South Wales, May 1968.
20 There is a common misconception from the 1960s instead, that this Australian Type of the area 1960s became involved in project of work of émigré architects teaching at the University of Melbourne such as Fritz Jantzen’s research into Australian housing in the 1950s and Zdenko Sturk’s (Sturev I Sjene Lights and Shadows) (1955), a beautiful photographic 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 Cenotaph appeared in 1952.** Boyd seems to have relied for inspiration design for the Italian Pavilion in Brussels in 1958. (1964) had not been published and Boyd would have been well aware of this changing social phenomenon.

21 For example, Boyd’s project house designs for Apple Tree Hill, (all planned by Frank Heath); Shepparton (Stephenson & Turner); Echuca (Bartlett; Buchan, Laird & Buchan).

29 Robin Boyd, The Walls Around Us, 11.
30 Robin Boyd, Australia’s Home, 11.
31 Boyd, Australia’s Home, 1.
32 Boyd, Australia’s Home, 1.
33 For example, Boyd’s project house designs for Apple Tree Hill, (all planned by Frank Heath); Shepparton (Stephenson & Turner); Echuca (Bartlett; Buchan, Laird & Buchan).
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. 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 blistered kooka figures on internal glass partitions 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 supposes that modernisation and architectural modernism show a path for industrialised providers of functional “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...
Boyd's approach to ugliness let me now describe its commonalities and differences with the approach of the AR. 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”[7] edited by Ian Nairn. 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 scathing prose various outrages against taste and even simple logic in building. But as Nairn writes twenty years later “the tourer 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 first under the title of “Exterior Furnishing, or Sharra vagy”, 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-denia”. 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 cases of preserved monuments in a desert of wire, concrete roads, cost 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 concrete roads, cosy plots and bungalows. There will be no real distinction 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 keep 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 Bourgeois 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 Sharra vasy” 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 selectively. 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 Arts and Crafts 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 value9 It is the unlikeliness 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 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 carcase of an ox as an instance of a revolting object which could provoke painterly delight... the eighteenth-century intellectualist cut right across the centuries linking Salvador Rosa with Salvador Dalí.

Ugliness for Hastings, in a memo going back to Aristotle, and rejigged in the more widely in Romanticism was a name for things empirically unlikable 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 Dalí 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 Furnishing, or Sharra vasy” 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 selectively. 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 Arts and Crafts 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 value9 It is the unlikeliness 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 the Picturesque theorist Uvedale Price:

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Top


Opposite


Not an architect, but a painter, Kenneth Rowntree, who contributes the drawings in this article, has paraphrased T.H. HUXLEY'S MAJORITY programme: the beauty of urban spaces and human activity can be enhanced, ugliness can be done, art, which you try to in the interior furnisher's shop, should be marked off so severely generous variety of shape, pattern, texture and colour in our urban situations. Make Huxley see the thing down in the Victorian past and the larger-blessed fates; enjoy the railway signed and the rough stone wall and the plan to the church. Don't be afraid of adding a twentieth-century wing to a Victorian house. All the features of the interior furnisher should also be the urban planner's, provided his estimate of working conditions are丝毫不错.
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 incoherence as a fault.6 Rowntree's drawing is after the “frankly vulgar become posh” effect in contrasting Tidorebrarian cottages and Victorian signage with modernist façades that are quite like those Boyd mocked. These graphic similarities raise a question of how many architect readers of The Australian Ugliness assimilated to the much more nuanced meal of the most popular journal of the day, the AR. Boyd’s drawings are not a world away from his friend Barry Humphries’ acerb; 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 of post-war reconstruction shifting 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 populist fashions. For Hastings rejecting technocracy and social-engineering meant rejecting utopian modernism while saving 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. If we think that architecture is a part of this urban level. If we think that architecture is a part of this education in literature, the visual and arts and architecture liberal philosophy of the ABC and BBC in assuming that an artistic style can speak for a liberal society.14 In 1967 in an article length review of the Smithson’s Economist Building and Banham’s dismissal of it as “aesthetic,”2 Boyd and 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 austerity architecture. A final point to make is 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 ARB Radio in 1967 entitled Articulated Australia follow the liberal philosophy of the anc and arc 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. 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 exhaust the "neuter". These are most 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.

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 apparatus 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 (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 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 exhibition (1963), for example, provided an immersive experience through a cacophony of images paired together to line a frame and animated through flickering light and sound. 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. 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 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.'
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 exhibition 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 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 textural 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 transparents 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 woolen 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 love 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 those 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 “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

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Opposite Robin Boyd “Expo 67 - A Designer’s World” - Design Australia, January 1967: 12-22. RMIT Design Archives, Artesian Exhibition 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, 2004 © 2019 Estate of Robin Boyd, courtesy Robin Boyd Foundation.


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

Robin Boyd: The Wizard of Oz Continued
EXHIBITS
in the Australian Pavilion at
EXPO 70
at Osaka, Japan, March 1970.
Specification

Robin Boyd
Romberg and Boyd, Architects
340 Albert Street,
East Melbourne, 3002
ROBIN BOYD
THE WIZARD OF OZ
Continued
Preceding Pages
Left
Expo '67, various exhibits designed by Robin Boyd, Life, June 12, 1967: 33, RMIT Design Archives, Aristoc Industries Archive

Preceding Pages
Right

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

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

ROBIN BOYD
THE WIZARD OF OZ
Continued
ROBIN BOYD
THE WIZARD OF OZ
Continued

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

Right
Model of Expo ’70, courtesy National Archives of Australia
Robin Boyd: The Wizard of Oz
Continued
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...'. 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, unreeing at a furious rate. The most modest pavilion had a trusty 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.’

It was estimated that around 80% of the displays within Expo '67 utilised audio-visual aids to attract the attention of the public to the theme of this world fair. 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. 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.’

While over 1 million visitors, the success of Boyd's exhibit design far exceeded the committee's expectations.

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 Metabolist who were directly involved with the planning of many of the exhibits at Expo 70.'

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-hanger' looking pavilion. Boyd was to complete the exhibition design with a theme he devised: ‘The Australian Contribution to Progress and Harmony for Mankind’.

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.’

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 perception of Australia as an agricultural country, and depict Australia as being simply based on agriculture.

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 ‘Gumtree’ tubular form fitted with travelers 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’. 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’ according to the designers. 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.’

However the experience within the Space Tube was also an exploration in the relationship between the visitor and the exhibit. Underpinning multimedia shows of the 1960s was the idea of mobility had fascinated architects such as Yona Friedman, Archigram and Constant while themes of mobility were also explored at CIAM 5 at Dubrovnik in 1956.

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. 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 'technisation 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. 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. This exhibit was innovative in its reliance on the motion of the visitors walking past the display to create its effects. Yuriko Furuhata suggests that...
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.” 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 tenseoidal structure of West German Pavilion and the geodetic dome of Buckminster Fuller’s United States of America Pavilion at Expo ’67. “But what will be inside those monstrous fragments of Utopia … an expo should be more than experimental architecture and exterior effects.” During a time when experiments with psychodelic drugs such as LSD had reached a zenith, one wonders whether Boyd himself had experimented with psychodelic 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.

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 Joe 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-1970s 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 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 Gropboyd Letters” offers a parallel account of the practice with which we viewed the future, or the warmth of our personal relationships. . . For starters, a number of 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
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 nipping.

Boyd contributed a self-financed project he was in the process of completing in order to keep his feet firmly planted 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. 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 communal, while the office claimed the work of each partner, each nonetheless tended to have his own clients and interests. Gromboyd 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", and the letters to and from Boyd and his partners reveal the 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 I've got rid of that. I've learnt things I couldn't at home.12

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 draftsman 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, being intrigued by each other's work. In their loose confederation, unimpeded by too much red tape, they decided to pool all their earnings into the communal, while the office claimed the work of each partner, each nonetheless tended to have his own clients and interests. 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, its [sic] outer perimeter supported by cables suspended from a mushroom roof cantilevered from the central lift core." 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 house in Frankston and the Leyser house, Kea, built on a triangular site in 1953, work in Tasmania for Claudio Azkorra was also in the offing; Romberg had worked for the Lutheran Church, the increasingly erratic Stanley Korman as well as the Sacred Heart Girls School, Oakleigh, Bruck Mills Visitor Centre, Wangaratta, and ICT Staff House, Deer Park. Boyd's contribution was primarily though not exclusively, domestic and introduced Pelican, the house for Prudence and Kenneth Myer at Daisy's Bay. Mit Eliza (demolished), the R Haughton James house in Keve 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." One of these projects was their appointment as joint architects with Yumcken 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.13

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ANATOMY OF A PRACTICE: 
THE GROMBOYD 
CORRESPONDENCE 
1956–57

Continued
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 Haughton 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 the things are far from well with Gromboyd. Let me say at once there is nothing personal in the present situation. Boy 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. Boy would have done it more sparingly, and perhaps more optimistically, but he is so busy.”

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. This was the job that Boyd saw as “their sort of work” a prominent cultural building with high public visibility. 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.” One of his first tasks on arrival 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 space.

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.” 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 Frist Otto’s work (presumably the Kassel handstand 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.” 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.

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 no change in the position of the poles would assist in removing the Salvation Army-tent appearance.”

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.” 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.” 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.

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...
November 16, 1974.

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'm sure, before I saw your drawings, it's likely to reverberate around Australia this building. That's because it's 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 realise, but I just want to confirm it — not getting committed to an untested design by premature presentation to the client. You were so right when you said to the assembled team that things just don't go smoothly as this job has so far. Every building should be redrawn at least three times! I hope the team is re-writing 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 scrawlings 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 Tooway: 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 bold 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 similar functions: mainly planning and building,
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 quietly 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 those preliminary sketches towards working drawings with a view to letting the earth moving contract early in the New Year”. Unquote.22

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 trap set by Y-F? So I see I may be able to bring a certain 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 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

Lord, I hope the Myer break isn’t as bad as it sounds.24

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 capitalise 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.25

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 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 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 capitalise on it.
Dear Frederick,

As a desperate ploy to try to explain the R.A. Gold medal as a jot-jot, I have encouraged Mark Sjuggerud to collaborate on a book of pictures & text of my buildings, which of course are many dozens. Also most are those done under B.E. or R.A. names, although I am presently using as a personal theft. 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 at it, I’d be grateful if you would approve or rewrite it, as well as what you think should be said.

All best,

Robin

340 Albert Street, Melbourne, C.P., 61-551, 41-5132.

June 23, 1970

62
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. 28

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 planes, the draftsman and renderer. 29 Unlike Roy, who “was pretty useless in the drawing room, or even a nuisance”, Boyd’s approach to architecture was “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 Parthen’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. 30 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. 31

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.
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.

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 1964. 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 associated with the pamphlet. That Corrigan assumed the editorship indicates that even as a student he was moving towards a conception of architecture that went beyond his mentors' Bauhaus generation - with its utter lack or 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. 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 tempers 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. Those Australian homes are not aesthetic calamities; they can and do nourish an imaginative world and constitute a region for the spirit." 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 disliking the book for its 'shill tone' and 'life denying drumbeat of negativity'. Now he believed:

"Featurism" is not an issue (if it ever was) it is assumed. 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 a window onto our world. Through this window we observe the evidence of lives. This is Australia. It is ours.'

2 Patrick McCaughey, ‘A Public Figure, Like Boyd.’ McCaughey’s book.
3 Maggie Edmond alerted me to this account in McCaughey’s book.
8 Patrick McCaughey, ‘A Public Figure, Like Boyd.’ McCaughey’s book.
9 Maggie Edmond alerted me to this account in McCaughey’s book.

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.

Opposite
Robin Boyd,

This Page
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.

MENZIES SYDNEY

June 24

Dear Peter,

Thank you very much indeed for your kind thought in sending me the handsome last word from the heart of each-arched window and for your letter. So far as the former I had time only to glance through before leaving Melbourne for a visit here, since the package arrived just as I was leaving. But I thought with me, and was delighted to get (not that I wasn't equally delighted with the former). I hope you enjoyed it.

I do fancy your being into it for a time, it must indeed be heady stuff. He never met Charlie Horse or Venturi, but I put the message that they are the latest machinery. I have a feeling that both must be nice men.

Gardiner partly because I liked the New Bauhaus, and I liked Venturi's book most of all his own examples at the beach (Presented modestly as they were, in the best of reasons for modesty). You don't mention what you think of the A.R.A. anything, Patricia & I stayed in the guest house on top of the building, and Paul is still living there and has his own bachelor's ground level as an entrance. A Noah's Ark cobbler's coffee shop/restaurant. Don't think I don't know what you mean about the Next Gallery, and wish me luck please because I'm only one of the three judges, and you know the rules, please because I'm only one of the three judges. All best, love & kisses. Do keep in touch.

ROBIN BOYD

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A long, low ranch house which can either be a very wide, 36-foot structure or be built at a smaller size. The windows can be set at any angle and the roof can be sloped or flat. The lowest window should be double-hung and lower the second floor. A long, low ranch house which can either be a very wide, 36-foot structure or be built at a smaller size. The windows can be set at any angle and the roof can be sloped or flat. The lowest window should be double-hung and lower the second floor.