

Rediscovering “The Australian Ugliness” Robin Boyd and the Search for the Australian Modern

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The ugliness I mean is skin deep. If the visitor to Australia fails to notice it immediately, fails to respond to the surfeit of colour, the love of advertisements, the dreadful language, the ladylike euphemisms outside public lavatory doors, the technical competence but the almost uncanny misjudgement in floral arrangements, or if he thinks that things of this sort are too trivial to dwell on, then he is unlikely to enjoy modern Australia. For the things that make Australian people, society and culture in some way different from others in the modern world are only skin deep. But skin is as important as its admirers like to make it, and Australians make much of it. This is a country of many colourful, patterned, plastic veneers, of brick-veneer villas, and the White Australia Policy.

Robin Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness*, 1960

Descent into Chaos

There is a moment, related in the opening pages of *The Australian Ugliness* by the architect Robin Boyd, when the Australian landscape seems impossibly beautiful. Boyd (1919-1971) is peering through the portal of an airplane as it flies over Darwin, the direction of travel presumably indicating a return trip from Europe. He describes the sun rising over the colour streaked void of the desert, revealing the union of a quiet ocean with a silent continent. He describes the ochres of the dirt punctuated by snaking creek beds and the shadows of trees. He notices how perfectly the landscape seen from the air emulates the maps that have been drawn of it. An invisible designer in wide, sweeping gestures has sketched out Boyd's landscape below, and this satisfies him immensely.

For, as is the tendency of architects, Boyd imagines the interface between land and sea as a fine, sinuous pencil line: as a landscape defined by its lineaments. From the air, the delineation of the landscape to his eyes is as clear and sharp as the draftsman's line. In this analogy he recalls his hero, Le Corbusier, who often drew and described places this way – as pure horizontal and vertical line. Like Boyd, Le Corbusier marvelled as he witnessed the landscapes of South America from the air, and he drew them accordingly. He understood the sketch as a symbol of potency rather than mimesis, for, as opposed to the painting, it marks out only an edge. Forms and shapes remain unfilled, ungraded and undefined. It is telling that Boyd too saw the Australian landscape this way: as a sketch, an arena of potential, where things “look their best in the longest view”.¹

But when he steps off the airplane Boyd's romanticism instantly turns to revulsion, and the chapter title “The Descent into Chaos” becomes all too apt. The serene, majestic landscape seen from the air is replaced on the ground by the Darwin airport hangar, with its “brilliant plastic chair coverings, richly polished wood trimmings, spun light fittings of bright copper preserved in lacquer, black wrought iron vases shaped like birds screwed to the wall at eye-level and holding bright little bunches of pink and orange flower heads.”² The plastic flowers in particular were amongst the worst offences for Boyd, who railed: “Plastic flowers, which seemed only a joke in

1 Robin Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness* (1960; Penguin Books, 1972), 42. Quotes taken from the 1972 edition.

2 *Ibid.*, 22.

1959, are now a universal menace.”³ The air-conditioned atmosphere of the airport masks the searing heat outside, and in the hotels one can find all the conveniences necessary: glazed ceramic tiled bathrooms, snowy towels and crisp white tablecloths. Marmalade in small, delicate crockery and trinkets in the gift shop; an Ayers Rock fridge magnet, a gaudy painted postcard of the Sydney Opera House; everywhere prettiness, neatness, politeness. Nothing of the landscape seen from the air: this is kept at bay by whatever brightly lit means necessary. On the ground, all the garishness of human settlement, all the “violence of artistic conflict”,⁴ is revealed.

On reading these opening remarks I immediately understand the way Boyd felt. He captures in visual terms an ambivalence and confusion that many of us who have left Australia have felt upon our return. The distant landscape, like the culture itself, is romanticised by the traveller from afar, and indeed, Australians have always been great travellers. Those of us living abroad are content to remember our country as that perfectly rendered view from the airplane. Each Australian has his or her own image of a country we imagine returning to, those images of home that “linger in the mind of a lover”.⁵

But when homesickness does drive us to return, the long-imagined country is not always the one in which we find ourselves. Instead, it is the country of those dreaded plastic flowers, of air-conditioned eave-less houses at war with the midday sun. Of highways and traffic clogged cities, of the relief of cool concrete patios on long, hot days. Of brick walls, cricket pitches and trimmed hedges. Of Sunday barbecues and relatives at war, of old friends who can't remember where you've been and care even less. Of fences and detention centres and open spaces divided and conquered. Of bright, flat light.

It is this country that has been thrown into sharp relief in our absence. We see it afresh, and we see it critically. We aren't strangers, but nor are we locals anymore. From the procession through the gleaming eave-less hall of the airport a heavy familiarity instantly and unexpectedly sets in, replacing the yearning we had previously felt to return. We suddenly remember all the reasons why we left. Now, of course, we want to turn around and get straight back on the plane.

“Skin Deep”: Veneer Aesthetics and the Cult of Featurism

That a country with natural gifts so impossibly sublime should be inhabited by the likes of us, those small-minded builders of brick cottages and shaded suburban streets, was to Boyd one of Australia's most potent architectural puzzles. Boyd believed it was the deep ambivalence and unease Australians felt about their right to dwell in such a place, and about their tenuous and peripheral claims to culture, that characterised them as a people. Indeed, he spent his life as a designer asking himself why this should be so, and trying to overcome it.

The Australian Ugliness (first published in 1960 to such great success that it is still in print), identified this ambivalence as well as its impoverished antidote, an aesthetic tendency that Boyd labelled “Featurism”. He speculated:

“Perhaps the explanation is that man, sensing that the vastness of the landscape will mock any object that his handful of fellows can make here, avoids anything that might be considered a challenge to nature. The greater and fiercer the natural background, the prettier and pettier the artificial foreground: this way there are no unflattering comparisons, no loss of face.”⁶

He went on to cite another of his heroes, the Swiss historian of modern architecture Sigfried Giedion, who believed that throughout history there had been two approaches to architecture: the organic and the planned. Organic architecture, Giedion said, might “grow into nature and out of it” while planned architecture would instead stand in contrast to it, like an Ancient Greek temple

3 Ibid., 17.

4 Ibid., 48.

5 Ibid., 16.

6 Ibid., 23.

placed on the crown of a rocky outcrop. To these two categories however, Boyd added a third: the *Featurist* approach, which, he noted, was “seldom adopted by respectable architects.” Featurism, in contrast to the other two categories, was “neither sympathetic nor challenging, but evasive, a nervous architectural chattering avoiding any mention of the landscape.”⁷ Featurism in short was the adopted visual style of an ambivalent, uncertain population at odds with its surroundings, unsure of how to inhabit them, clinging to the edges of a continent and looking everywhere for answers but into its own interior.

It was this same nervous evasion of truth that Boyd despised about Australian man-made environments, and he identified the veneer as its most deplorable weapon. For Boyd, there were two kinds of veneers. The first was the cloaking kind, that is, the simple cover-all: brick veneer house construction in the suburbs, brightly coloured or wood or marble imitation plastic veneers in the home, veneers of advertising in the streets, veneers of imported timber on plain native floorboards. The second, less formal but more insidious kind was the veneer of camouflage: the disguising of the reality of an environment by means of introducing arbitrary distractions, colours, and shapes. So, a Featurist city was one in which each building fought for attention over the other, where there were a plethora of “features of interest” (Gothic style churches, Classical style town halls, English style gardens) but no overall cohesion, and where the eye was never allowed to be still, forever flitting from one object to another. Featurism was above all characterised by “the subordination of the essential whole and the accentuation of selected separate features”. The only streets to escape this kind of distracting veneer of camouflage, Boyd thought sadly, were simply those where “no one cares”.⁸

The application of veneers was also for Boyd indicative of something darker: a cheerful mask worn over an enduring sadness. There was always the sense that European man had only ever “scrabbled on the surface”⁹ of a country in which he did not belong: a country that he stole, and because of that, could never really own. Seen in this light the preoccupation with veneers, the stifling unease of the suburbs, the hot winds from the desert ruffling “the net curtains of the most elegant drawing-rooms in the most secluded Georgian retreats of Vacluse or Toorak”;¹⁰ all take on a quality of eerie dislocation. What Boyd really meant (and it was a radical leap to make in 1960 in a politically conservative Australia), was that the Australian, unable to come to grips with the brutal history of colonisation, is only capable of applying swap-and-go veneers, which he wields as protection against the grim realities of his country’s genesis. Featurism was more than an aesthetic problem in Boyd’s eyes: it was also a deeply political one.

Boyd on the International Scene

Yet other countries, Brazil notably, had succeeded in making its history of colonisation into its biggest architectural success: the purveyors of Brazilian modernism adopted the metaphor of “cannibalism” with zeal, arguing that it was precisely this ability to take the best of many cultures, both imported and indigenous, and create something new that gave Brazilian art and architecture its unique quality. But the Australians, like the English Boyd thought, were far more timid and dreary in their approach – certainly more so than the Americans, toward whom he could be generous in some respects: “The bad American architect tends to be a little more adventurous, which gives a certain liveliness to his vulgarity.”¹¹

Boyd had already been actively engaged in debates in Britain surrounding “picturesque town planning” that were at that time raging in the British journal *The Architectural Review*, to which he had contributed some articles loosely related to the “Townscape” campaign. He was thus

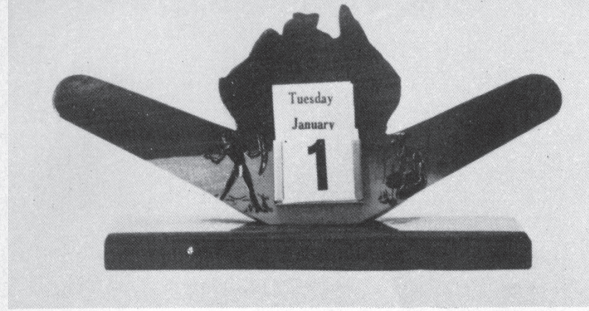
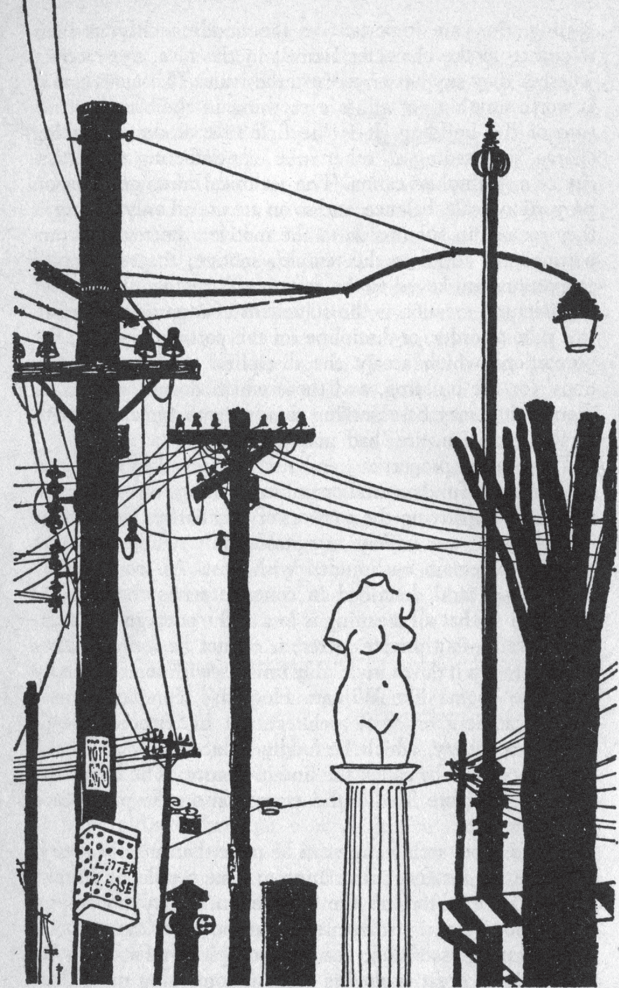
7 *Ibid.*, 24.

8 *Ibid.*, 23.

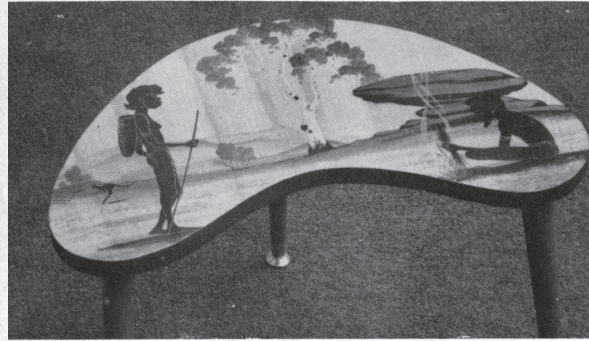
9 *Ibid.*, 22.

10 *Ibid.*

11 *Ibid.*, 16.



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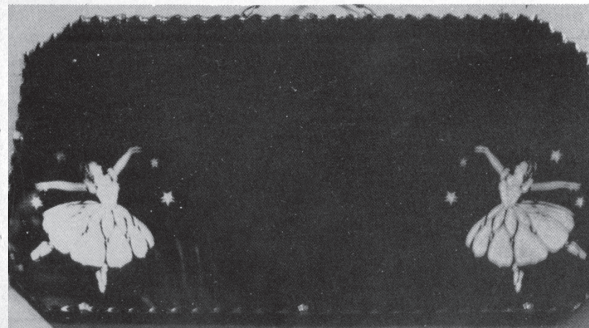


Fig. 1. (above left) Robin Boyd's illustration from *The Australian Ugliness*

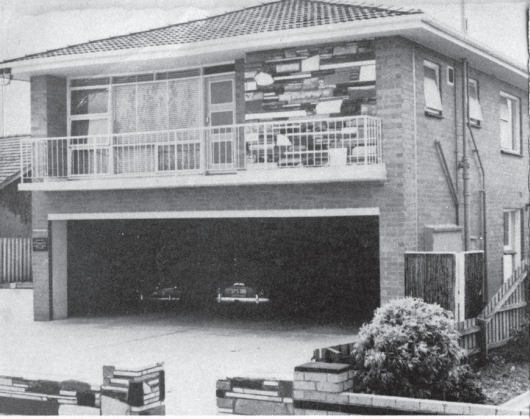
Fig. 2. (above right) 'Featurism beautifies everyday objects'; photographs from Boyd's *The Australian Ugliness*

Fig. 3. (following page, top) 'Original Australian Contemporary' and 'Arboraphobiaville'; double page photographic spread from Boyd's *The Australian Ugliness*

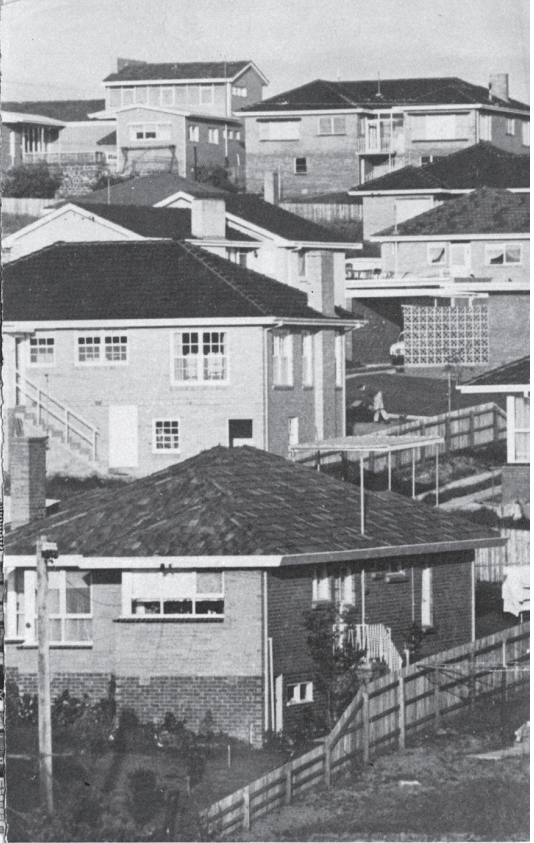
Fig. 4. (following page, bottom) Dame Edna Everage at the Ascot Races in England with 'feature(ist)' Sydney opera house hat

already familiar with discourses in that country that advocated for a greater attention to be paid to the whole visual impression of a town, and the proper integration of new post-war developments with the older fabric of the city.¹² He was certainly aware, then, that debate on Featurism was not confined to Australia alone, and that much of the "ugliness" he denounced was international. But Boyd reserved his most cutting, satirical barbs for his fellow countrymen, certain that they were tough enough to shoulder the burden. He maintained that this kind of criticism was more than healthy; it was absolutely necessary, and so, he said, "In this spirit I feel obliged to reaffirm

¹² *Ibid.*, 42. On this subject he mentions specifically Ian Nairn's article "Outrage", in *The Architectural Review* (June 1955): 363. Also notable for addressing similar themes is Donald Gazzard's book *Australian Outrage: The Decay of a Visual Environment* (Sydney: Ure Smith, 1966). For a comprehensive study of Boyd's role in the scene surrounding the 'Townscape' movement in Britain and related discourses in Australia, see Mathew Aitchison, 'The Boyd Ultimatum' in *AA Files* 66, 59-67.



K. Original Australian Contemporary
L.



D. Arboraphobiaville



that the Australian ugliness is not only unique in several ways, but is also worse than most other countries' kinds."¹³

The Australian child was, Boyd thought, at a particular disadvantage to the American or British child, being neither exposed to the "pre-Featurist" aspects of earlier centuries in Britain, nor the bold, confident and optimistic heroism of twentieth century American design. The Australian child (and one assumes Boyd means the urban Australian child) had to get by with only the "depressing deformities of nature and architecture," ignorant "of the meaning of architectural integrity."¹⁴ Even worse, all the imports from America and Britain were just that little bit out of date, the latest fashions in any category being judged frequently "too glamorous" for understated Australia.¹⁵ The ultimate Featurist parody in human form was and still is Dame Edna Everage, a character played by the satirist Barry Humphries (a friend of Boyd's) in drag. Edna, the grotesque and outlandish caricature of a housewife from Melbourne's Mooney Ponds, is the arbiter of propriety and 'good taste'. A proud Australian Anglophile, simultaneously puritanical and dirty, she appears on television in England, America and Australia postulating on every possible subject; her lavender wig bobbing in time with her plastic earrings shaped like parrots and garish floral frock. Her lipstick is immaculate on the wide mouth caught between a laugh and a sneer, her crystal studded glasses glint as she laughs condescendingly. As obsessed by what others think of her as she is arrogant and dismissive of them, everything she says has a double meaning: she is the immaculate veneer in human form, and one of Australia's most successful comedy exports.

To set the scene, then, into which Boyd released his firecracker of a book: Australia, young, isolated and lonely, uncertain of whether to be British or American, and still too racist to consider fraternising with her Asian neighbours (remember, this is 1960) – is adrift and unsure of herself:

"He [the Australian] has high assurance in anything he does combined with a gnawing lack of confidence in anything he thinks."¹⁶

This intellectual shyness then manifests itself stylistically; in the adoption of Gothic Revival and Georgian for the Anglophiles, Californian Bungalow style for the "Austericans" as he called those America-lovers, Orientalism for those who would like to be closer with Asia, and finally, "Log-Cabin Bushmanist" or "Colonial" styles for those staunch Aussie nationalists.¹⁷ Everywhere, borrowed style and new frills on old, tired forms. And the ironic pall cast over it all: "The Featurist wants to belong, but where can he?"¹⁸

Boyd's buildings and theories evolved, as is common in Australian creative life, away from the attentions of more dominant discourses in Europe and America and thus were honed in relative isolation. He also seems to have also had the typical Australian's disdain for overt self-promotion.¹⁹ Yet it could be argued this isolation is what gives his text its righteous power and its healthy cynicism, and his buildings their quiet, confident self-possession. Isolated Boyd was, but it was certainly not isolation bred in ignorance. It is important to note that his arguments for an Australian Modernism did not stem from any kind of parochial unawareness of the situations and histories of other countries. In fact, quite the opposite: Boyd was extraordinarily well read (for an architect at least), quoting figures as diverse as Plato to Wittkower, Ruskin and Hogarth to give his arguments against Featurism and toward unity in design historical weight.²⁰ Despite railing against the practice of cannibalism in architecture, Boyd was in many ways as much a cannibal as any Australian with a role to play in the country's cultural life, as was evidenced by his background, which drew on influences from Europe, the USA and Japan.

13 *Ibid.*, 15.

14 *Ibid.*, 17.

15 *Ibid.*, 82.

16 *Ibid.*, 75.

17 *Ibid.*, 72.

18 *Ibid.*, 73.

19 Julia Bolles-Wilson and Peter Wilson, *A Handful of Productive Paradigms* (Münster: Bolles + Wilson, 2009), 77.

20 See in particular the chapter "The Pursuit of Pleasingness" in Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness*.

Boyd grew up in a Melbourne of the 1930s, a time in architecture he described as an “atmosphere of conflict in the middle of the greatest revolution in architectural history.”²¹ However, as could be expected, the revolution in Melbourne was not quite as heroic. Boyd described it, coming ten years too late, as “a thin reflection... of the original one in Europe.” The polemics of the revolution had also been somewhat watered down. With the Australian’s characteristic ambivalence, he resignedly notes: “In Europe the opposing sides were clearly black or white. Here there were several shades of grey.”²²

But relief came in 1948 when Boyd was offered a scholarship that allowed him to travel through Europe for the first time, and the experience transformed him. The pilgrimage to Europe to see the buildings only ever studied in books is still made today, and it is one that we as Australian architecture students all made at some point or another during our education. Many of us, like Boyd in his time, had never been overseas.

In 1956, three years after Boyd had established his own office in Melbourne with partners Roy Grounds (1905-1981) and Frederick Romberg (1910-1992), he spent a year as visiting professor at MIT University at the invitation of Walter Gropius. There, he came into contact with Saarinen, Wright, Mies, Henry Russell Hitchcock, Paul Rudolph and Maxwell Fry. While at MIT he was praised by the elderly Gropius, somewhat of a mentor to him, as “one of the most precise writers on contemporary architecture.”²³ Geoffrey Blainey put it perhaps more eloquently when he said of Boyd’s writing: “He could chisel out a sentence so that it had a precise meaning, or he could weave a sentence that had meanings and meanings.”²⁴

Philip Johnson also became enamoured of Boyd’s written style, in particular his 1965 history of modern architecture that he, with characteristic curiosity and understatement, called *The Puzzle of Architecture*. In an article for the *Architectural Forum* Johnson had gone as far as to state: “every architect must have this book.”²⁵ In it, Boyd attempted to narrate and categorise the various current architectural movements with a sort of Antipodean no-nonsense decisiveness. In the margins of the book there were no photos of buildings to be seen, but instead, his own small sketches of each case study beautifully laid out beside the prose. Johnson, fascinated by Boyd’s attempts to classify modern architecture, saw the book as a kind of “Rosetta stone to the new directions in architecture.”²⁶

If *The Australian Ugliness* dealt with the impoverishment of modernism in Australia, then *The Puzzle of Architecture* dealt with the same theme on an international scale, and concordantly received more international attention. In the book Boyd was trying to come to grips with a movement he loved, but which he saw to be in disarray. By the 1960s he saw only anarchy everywhere, asking himself: “What is the aim of it all?”²⁷ He sought in some sense with *The Puzzle* to restore a clear line of thought to a movement he thought had lost its way in the post war commercial confusion, and he remained ultimately optimistic that this would happen: “I see a discipline returning to modern architecture, and a regrowth of artistic and intellectual convictions after a rather silly season”, he wrote in 1965, “and thus a return to a worthwhile cause.”²⁸

Boyd had been writing regularly in Britain for the aforementioned *Architectural Review* since the early 1950s, and for *Harper’s Magazine* in the USA. Much of the material for *The Puzzle of Architecture* came out of various articles he had written for these two publications. Two years after *The Australian Ugliness* was released, Boyd also completed a monograph on Kenzo Tange, and six years after that, his *New Directions in Japanese Architecture* (1968). This was the first English

21 Robin Boyd, *The Puzzle of Architecture* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1965), 1.

22 Ibid., 1.

23 Paraphrase by Peter Wilson in Wilson, *Productive Paradigms*, 77.

24 Geoffrey Blainey, foreword to the 1977 edition of Robin Boyd, *Australia’s Home: Why Australians built the way they did* (Penguin Books, 1st ed. 1951), 5.

25 Philip Cortelyou Johnson, *Philip Johnson: Writings*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 132.

26 Commentary by Robert A. M. Stern in Johnson, *Writings*, 128.

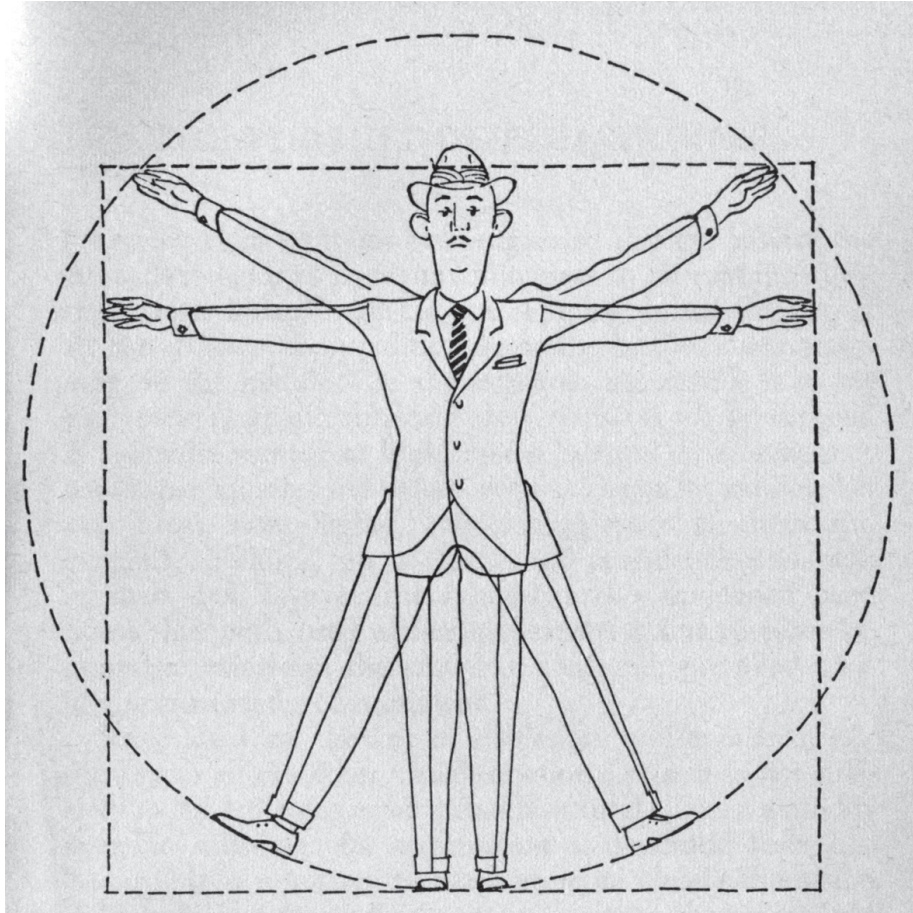
27 Boyd, *Puzzle of Architecture*, 3.

28 Ibid., 3.

language text to deal seriously with the new generation of Japanese Metabolist architects, and a Metabolist influence can be seen creeping at that time into Boyd's own designs in Melbourne, such as the 1968 Ormond College Student Residence and an unrealised design for Carnich Towers (1969-71). On this second project a young Australian design student named Peter Wilson was employed, who went on to attend the Architectural Association in London and graduated with his partner Julia Bolles to found the successful Münster-based firm Bolles + Wilson. It is thus not entirely spurious to trace a pedagogical lineage from the German Gropius working in the US to Boyd in Australia and then back, ultimately, to Wilson in Germany: a kind of Bermuda triangle of architectural influence that points to Boyd's own role as an unequivocal player on the international scene, despite his regular shunning of it and his ultimate return to the southern hemisphere.

On radio, television and in newspaper columns back in Australia, and as a lecturer at his former school the University of Melbourne, Boyd campaigned against what he saw as unacceptable urban vandalism and advocated the better design of housing and cities. His television slots as part of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's annual Boyer Lectures in 1967 were immensely popular, his erudite prose coming to life in lively, arresting speech; his charisma transmitted from black and white television sets into weatherboard and brick veneer clad living rooms throughout the flat, treeless suburbs he had always railed against. The lecture series was simply titled "Artificial Australia".

Fig. 5. "The successful Featurist"; Boyd's illustration from *The Australian Ugliness*



Boyd at Home

Had Boyd lived beyond 1972 he may have revised some of his arguments in light of subsequent leaps in Australian architecture and design. Especially in consideration of the grip critical regionalism, as championed by the historian Kenneth Frampton, took on the architectural community in later years; led by architects like Jörn Utzon, Glenn Murcutt, Richard Leplastrier, Britt Andresen, Greg Burgess and Harry Seidler among many others. Yet the fact remains that the fundamental problems he identified with the Australian approach to man-made environments have by no means been stamped out.

As children in the eighties and nineties, we too grew up “on steak and sugar”, as Boyd put it.²⁹ We were healthy and sunburnt, but we roamed the hot streets of the suburbs, not the cane fields. We cooled our heads in the public pool, and not the billabong. Like 95% of the population of Australia, we were city children. We grew up on the rim of the continent and imagined our departure: the day in which we could step off the edge of the shore altogether and out into the world, just as Boyd did. The sentimental pioneering stories of man pitted against nature meant nothing to us, save during those rare summer holidays when we were taken camping and fishing “down the coast”. Instead, we spent our days in hot cars, sweltering classrooms, and in the Greek or Vietnamese family run corner milk bars that bookended the repetitive graffitied rows of double-storey workers’ cottages in our inner city Sydney neighbourhood.

We were, ice blocks in hand, our heads cooling against the concrete steps of our inner city house, engaged in a battle with nature of sorts. Even in the city, we could still smell the coming summer rain, and hear the birds calling in warning above the rumble of traffic or the screech of train tracks. And we could still see the black smoke rising above our heads on those rare occasions when bushfires burned fiercely on the outer rim of the city. Once, a blanket of ash rained down into our cracked front yard.

Those nineteenth century workers’ row terraces in which we lived boasted party walls hard up against each other, staggered with the slope of the street. Each house was no more than three metres wide, and with their indeterminable sagging and chipping wrought iron balconies they formed a kind of repetitive single façade shielding their long, dark, damp interiors in which somewhere the television was always on. Sydney was graced with the occasional example of colonial Victorian grandeur or the austere and block-like Georgian sandstone architecture of the early penal colonies. But these were interwoven with gleaming skyscrapers and flimsy business parks, car yards, freeways and tilt-up concrete, brick, smog and advertising on cheaply erected buildings destroyed by the sun and the rain almost before they’d been finished. And those tawdry plastic flowers: plastic on my grandmother’s table and sofa, porcelain trinkets on small white doilies in her cabinet, ornamental plates featuring painted native birds ranged out along the shelf, and an old hand coloured picture of the British Queen at her coronation fixed to the wall.

“Follow the successful Featurist with his neatly creased jacket-sleeves and his four-button cuffs when he leaves the office in his two-tone Holden (light pink with plum feature panel) and goes home to have tea in the feature room he calls the sunroom... Everywhere, the closer you look the more features you see, as in the old novelty picture of a man holding a portrait of himself, until the artist’s and the viewer’s eyesight fail.”³⁰

The Feature trampled over any cohesive narrative, visual or historical, for we were ensconced in a piecemeal environment with a confusing, cannibalistic history. And all of us were from, or had family from, somewhere else: Italy, Vietnam, China, Ireland, Indonesia, Britain, Greece, and Lebanon. Our families were the ones who escaped all the sinking ships of the past two centuries. We were mongrels, descended from pirates. The histories of all these far away places were interwoven with ours somehow: but we only knew them through the accumulation of bits and pieces, old stories from old countries. Sometimes, because of this, we felt like frauds.

²⁹ Boyd, *Australian Ugliness*, 16.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 47.

Reading *The Australian Ugliness* as a first year architecture student, all of these visual memories came rushing back. When I read it again now, they still do. How difficult it is to reconcile them with one's architectural training, which seems forever to breed the desire to order and control one's environment, and through that, one's history. How difficult too it must have been for Boyd, a devotee of modern architecture and its tendency toward the cultivation of overarching narratives.

There is no doubt, for example, that his attitude toward the design of the urban environment tended toward visual uniformity. For although Featurism could practise its brand of "cloak and camouflage"³¹ in any environment or on any object, Boyd thought it was at its worst in Australian cities. In this he was a staunch purist in the burgeoning age of the Post-Moderns. For only a few years after the revised 1968 edition of *The Australian Ugliness* appeared, Robert Venturi and Denise Scott-Brown would publish their influential treatise *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972), in which they would claim that the refuse of a city cultivated its own forms of beauty. An increasingly unfashionable traditionalist, Boyd could not find any perverse aesthetic pleasure, as Venturi and Scott-Brown did, in the detritus, grit and tack of the modern city. To him these things were only evidence of a dishonest culture, unable to come to terms with itself or to practise any kind of self-respect. To him this refuse of capital was simply *ugly*: A Featurism of the worst sort, the result of an indiscriminate importation of mass-modernism from overseas markets. He captures in one passage the perfect dichotomy of romance and reality the Australian city could present to the eye:

"The Sydneysider pictures his city from the Harbour or the Bridge, its new white offices piling up against the sky they are trying to scrape. He does not see nor recognise the shabby acres of rust and dust and cracked plaster and lurid signs in the older inner suburbs. The Melbourne thinks of his city as Alexandra Avenue where it skirts the river and the shady top end of Collins Street, which are indeed two of the most civilised pieces of urbanity in the world. He dismisses as irrelevant to this vision the nervy miscellany of the main commercial artery, Swanston Street, not to mention the interminable depression of the flat, by-passed inner suburbs."³²

Boyd's prose was never less than evocative, stinging, and at times painful to read but impossible to contradict. His witty assuredness coats a serious, pleading tone. For Boyd was only a cynic on the surface, and only ever in writing. In truth, he was a deeply moral modernist who still believed environments could transform societies. He still subscribed to the idea that a culture can be "improved" through the architecture it produces: an idea already, in 1960, fast becoming old hat. While Venturi and Scott-Brown could be playful and light-hearted about the design of cities, Boyd, in some very fundamental ways, could not.³³ In the sense of his theoretical equation of the ornamental trappings of façade display with a kind of moral bankruptcy, we almost see Boyd becoming positively Loosian in his attitude:³⁴

"The Australian Ugliness begins with 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. It ends in betrayal of the element of love and a chill near the root of national self-respect."³⁵

The veneer for him was the very clearest expression of "Australian living practices and artistic habits", although "which came first, the veneer or the habits, has never been firmly established."³⁶ The question of Modernism and its relationship to articulations of nationhood was a complex one for Boyd, and it reveals itself everywhere in the contradictions of the text. For if he longed in one sense for an International-style monastic modernism characterised by formal purity, consistency

31 Ibid., 24.

32 Ibid., 16.

33 It is interesting to note that in *The Puzzle of Architecture*, Boyd chose not to include the Post-Modernists in his assessment of current trends in architecture, and made no mention of Venturi or his contemporaries, despite their evident activity on the scene by 1965.

34 See Adolf Loos, "Ornament and Crime", in *Programs and Manifestos on 20th Century Architecture*, ed. Ulrich Conrads (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1970).

35 Boyd, *Australian Ugliness*, 251.

36 Ibid., 10-11.

and continuity and the banishment of the local tendency to prettify or to add “Features”; he was also contrarily consumed by the proper articulation of a modernism that could be truly Australian rather than imported from Europe or the US.³⁷ This was the difficult paradox of his thought, and he believed there must be a solution to it beyond the Featurist approach of simply ‘tinging an old thing with a new colour.’³⁸

He also recognised that if the veneer could be used to coat an Australian product with a cloak of foreign charm for the locals who tended to believe foreign things were “better”, then it could be also used the other way around: to give imported styles the veneer of “Australian character”, so that we would not have to search properly and earnestly for a style of our own. For example, he posits, “the elusive quality of Australian design which can be called typical, and can be recognised if transported abroad, is not a fundamental original quality. It would be better to call it a thin but well-established Australian veneer on international Western culture.”³⁹

Against this imported Featurism worn as a prettifying mask, Boyd certainly argued for a truly Australian Modern beyond mere cosmetic effects, but real solutions were offered more through his own architectural projects than his writings. His polemical text must be set against his own ambivalent and nuanced take on architecture, which was both cannibalistic and deeply site-specific. For Boyd, the twin activities of writing and practice were a means of teasing out that problem characterised not only as eternally Australian, but also implicit in the very contingency of the modern experience: can it ever be possible to give valid form to a displaced culture within an usurped, alien landscape?

Boyd was convinced 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.”⁴⁰ Yet fifty years later, in the twenty-first century, we are more wary of these arguments. We want to tread carefully. We might even cringe at Boyd’s statement that an “Australian School” of design should be “bound up with the collective character of the Australian people.”⁴¹ We begin to feel that there is no single and overarching “Australian character” to be understood, and we wonder why there should be. We know that the search for a national style can carry deeply suspect overtones in any culture. It smacks of totalitarianism and exclusion, uneasy nationalism, cultural post-justification, perhaps even xenophobia.

But this is where the architectural project becomes important: as a means by which Boyd’s brand of modernism could be tested and shown, rather than dictated in writing. One recalls immediately as a comparison the spectacular discrepancy between Boyd’s hero Le Corbusier’s written and built oeuvre; yet this might only be considered in negative terms if one presumes that writing and building are attempting the same thing, and for the same ends. The fact is that *The Australian Ugliness* devotes much more space to describing Featurism than offering concrete solutions for its insidious hold over cultural life, and this is its particular strength. Yet at the same time the potentially less explicit or literal nature of the built project (as opposed to the written manifesto) is the more natural arena for the testing of the idea that an Australian architecture could be determined by a set of “rules of process”. This process was not a dictatorial search for a single style representing a unified culture, nor a kind of mass-produced global neutrality of the kind advocated by Walter Gropius and occasionally promoted by Boyd,⁴² but rather a strategy encompassing the honest attempt to understand the place in which a project was set before that place could be transformed by it.

37 Boyd had already attempted to trace the sources of an “Australian Style” back through history in a much earlier book titled *Australia’s Home: Why Australians built the way they did* (Penguin Books, 1951). Besides trying to make sense of the hodge-podge of various Australian vernacular styles, in this localised history can be found the seeds of the search for an Australian modernism that could be directly adapted to, and in turn, transformed by the Australian landscape and climate.

38 Boyd, *Australian Ugliness*, 66.

39 *Ibid.*, 10.

40 *Ibid.*, 250.

41 *Ibid.*, 10.

42 *Ibid.*, 131.

Boyd's Buildings and the Rule of Process

Melbourne was a city Boyd dismissed as “a dressmaker’s floor strewn with snippings of style.”⁴³ The origins of this eclecticism were to be found in the work of one of the city’s most successful nineteenth century architects, the self-made man Joseph Reed, who left his mark on almost every building of note in the city over the course of four prosperous decades before the infamous economic crash of the 1890s. Reed was characterised by Boyd as a man with a “feature for every occasion,”⁴⁴ clothing buildings as he saw fit in deference to propriety and fashion. But beyond all of this civic development was the blanket of “smug suburbia”, and the undeniable fact that Melbourne, like most Australian cities, was a city of the private dwelling.

The arena of domestic architecture was the one field in which Boyd conceded Australians were more practiced than their European counterparts.⁴⁵ He himself had already cut his teeth as director of the Victorian Institute of Architects’ Small Homes Service from 1947-1953, a surprisingly innovative government organisation which provided designs for inexpensive housing built to modern functionalist principles to the public for a small fee. Boyd had observed, in 1951, that “Australia is the small house”, further adding; “ownership of one in a fenced allotment is as inevitable and unquestionable a goal of the average Australian as marriage.”⁴⁶ It is no surprise, then, that it was housing that Boyd’s office became primarily known for, and it was this type of work that became his testing ground.

For throughout Melbourne, as well as further afield along the Mornington Peninsula, there can be found a secret archipelago of Boyd buildings – mainly houses, many now demolished, that together form a kind of theory by design: the architect Peter Wilson has even compared them to the California Case Study houses in breadth, ambition and accomplishment.⁴⁷ Counteracting the Australian tendency toward isolated and temporary buildings, non-committal and “alone in a vacuum”⁴⁸, these buildings begin to give us a clue as to Boyd’s process, and of the kind of approach Boyd wanted for the Australian city. This was not the approach of the individual, creative architect-genius and his one-off projects, each fighting for dominance over the other, but rather the systematic application of rules and exemplars that could begin to serve as models for the slow transformation of the landscape. He admired the work of the “spiritual fathers” Gropius, Le Corbusier and Mies, not because of their individual building achievements, but because of their proposals for various systems and methods of urban transformation that could be applied to many situations: Le Corbusier’s *Le Modulor* being one such prominent example.⁴⁹ The idea of an overarching principle governing a range of smaller individual variations is what interested him the most.

At some points in *The Australian Ugliness*, Boyd offers the “impersonal aesthetic of the machine” as a possible antidote to Featurism, without going much further in the argument.⁵⁰ He does, for example, advocate a dwelling model like that promoted by Gropius, in which standardised components could be assembled by individual families to suit them within a series of prefabricated systems.⁵¹ Within this uniform backdrop “feature buildings” would be allowed to occur, yet they would be free of the hallmarks of Featurism. He thought this would lead to two types of building: the science of space enclosure (making up the majority of the urban fabric),

43 *Ibid.*, 49.

44 *Ibid.*, 58.

45 *Ibid.*, 66.

46 Boyd, *Australia’s Home*, 7.

47 Wilson, *Productive Paradigms*, 76.

48 Boyd, *Australian Ugliness*, 34.

49 *Ibid.*, 126.

50 *Ibid.*, 131.

51 In the Australian context this ideal was promoted in an influential book by architect Walter Bunning (1912-1977) titled *Homes in the Sun* (1945), which advocated new strategies in the design of postwar Australian housing to better suit the local environment. Unfortunately the book is now out of print.

and the art of architecture (seen in a few select landmarks). The in-between building (the realm of Featurism), which was neither one nor the other, would apparently disappear.

Yet this somewhat simplistic take on Modernism is not what we find in his built projects at all, which are far more nuanced and site responsive. Boyd, evidently, was not willing to do away with the role of the architect in every day life altogether – but nor was he willing to turn the individual project into an ivory tower, either Featurist or Modern.

His solution lay in a particular “rule of process” encompassing the assessment of the constraints of a site and program, the development of the unifying motive or “central idea”, and finally the employment of the appropriate techniques to carry it out.⁵² Were these parameters to be followed, Boyd thought, a “truthful” building would emerge. This process furnished him with the tools to carry out what he had wished for and written so fervently about: an original architecture for Australia based on the transmission of original ideas, not the camouflage of a lack of them.

Boyd’s somewhat unfashionable return to the great “Idea” as the prime generator of form was something he believed modern architecture on the international stage had lost.⁵³ He thought it could be regained in an Australian context, and indeed he pointed out many examples of where this had been done. As he showed by comparing the very different design approaches of Australian modernists Harry Seidler (1923-2006) and Sydney Ancher (1904-1979), as long as a building was true to its idea whatever that idea was, it would not be a bad building. When faced with the same steep site Seidler, he mused, would hang his building off the cliff whereas Ancher might nestle it into the hillside. Seidler would choose a cold palette of steel and glass, Ancher a rough and ready one of brick and timber. The Seidler house might stand out, the Ancher house might blend in. Seidler might pit himself in opposition to nature, whereas Ancher might choose to lie down with it.

But he was adamant that both hypothetical houses, despite following different lines of development, would be good buildings because their ideas were strong. Both could stand next to each other and hold their own without recourse to affect, for “all things made with an idea and an integrity can sit happily together, however different they look.”⁵⁴ In this aspect Boyd’s ideas should be differentiated from the classical notion that each feature of a building be subordinated to the whole in a compositional sense. More important to Boyd was that individual features should bend to a central idea in a theoretical sense. This had little to do with what the building, ultimately, looked like. In this he shared some of the ideas of the New Brutalists in Britain, and indeed he references them in his text.⁵⁵

Two houses forming part of the constellation of Boyd designs that swept through the back lots of Melbourne that are worth mentioning are the Troedel House (1954-56) in Wheeler’s Hill, and Boyd’s own family home, the Marsh Street House (1958) in South Yarra. The latter was widely published, being featured in *Japan Interior Design* in 1962 and *The Architectural Review* in 1960 and 1963. What strikes one instantly about these two houses is the tightness of their plans. The floor area of both is relatively small, not like the new houses of today. All the living functions are closely fitted together like a jigsaw circumscribed by an unwavering rectangular geometry. In plan at least, the outer walls wrap the inner rooms tightly, as if to stop them from bursting out of the tight footprint altogether. In this one is reminded of Le Corbusier’s Villa Garches plan, so well analysed in an essay by Colin Rowe.⁵⁶

52 Boyd, *Australian Ugliness*, 142. On the central role of the formal idea in the design process see also Boyd’s contemporary, Hungarian-born architectural theorist and teacher L. Peter Kollar (1926-2000), whose activities were concentrated around the University of New South Wales. He was closely aligned to Boyd’s way of thinking not only in his emphasis on the importance of the central idea but also in his teaching of the equation that “Function equals Truth and Truth equals Beauty”. See, for example, papers published locally by the University of New South Wales Faculty of Architecture, Kensington, NSW; “On the Whole and the Part” (1985) and “Patterns of Delightful Architecture” (1987).

53 Boyd, *Australian Ugliness*, 179. See also Boyd, *Puzzle of Architecture*.

54 Boyd, *Australian Ugliness*, 145-146.

55 *Ibid.*, 220.

56 Colin Rowe, *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1947).

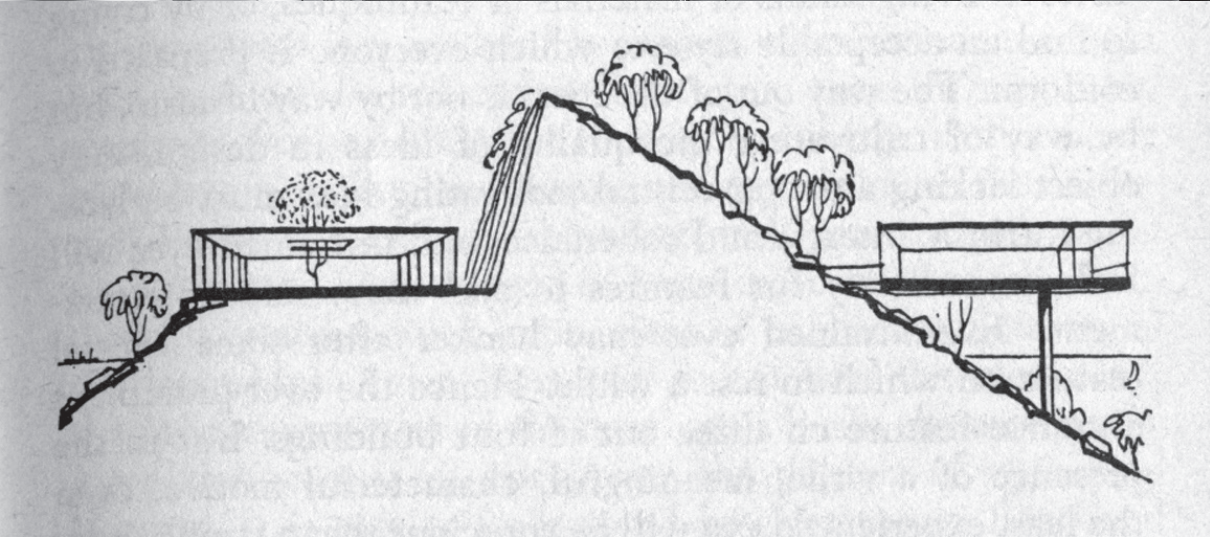


Fig. 6. Typical inner city terraced houses, Sydney; photographer Letizia Coppo

Fig. 7. Two hypothetical houses by the architects Sydney Ancher and Harry Seidler as imagined by Boyd; illustration from *The Australian Ugliness*



The rooms in plan do seem tightly packed, the clarity and economy of the layout precise, even if a little claustrophobic. But the plan is a little deceptive. It is when one moves from the plan to photographs, or visits the spaces in person, that this impression of pure economy is contradicted. For despite the admirably functional plan, the spaces are indeed quite sensuous, open and light. One of Boyd's favourite devices for achieving this was the slatted two-layer timber pergola. In the Troedel House, for example, he used it along the north face of the rectangular footprint, slicing an outdoor area out of one corner of the rectangular box and setting the rooms back in a staggered fashion so that each had generous access to the triangular outdoor space. The pergola, held aloft by columns as slender as eucalypts, was then used to cast a myriad of shadows across the outer walls and within the rooms.

Functionally the pergola of the Troedel House acted as a shading device against the hot summer sun, but its angle was such that in winter the lower rays were allowed to penetrate and heat the inner spaces of the house. But more than an environmental aid, the timber itself had a softness and an "amenability" to it,⁵⁷ and the patterns of light transmitted by the gaps between the members echoed the dappled light of sparse gum tree leaves. The pergola teamed with Australia's hard, bright, flat light cast neon sharp criss-crossing lines against the external walls of the house in an endless patterned play.

In perspective, we see the real clarity of the plan and section united in this house. The pergola roof completes the rectangular geometry so evident in plan, and within this invisible barrier defined only by the shape of the roof, the walls of the house are allowed to move at will. In elevation, the

57 Boyd once described timber as "the most marvelously sympathetic and amenable material in the architectural larder." Robin Boyd. *Livina in Australia* (Svdnev: Peraamon Press. 1970). 40.

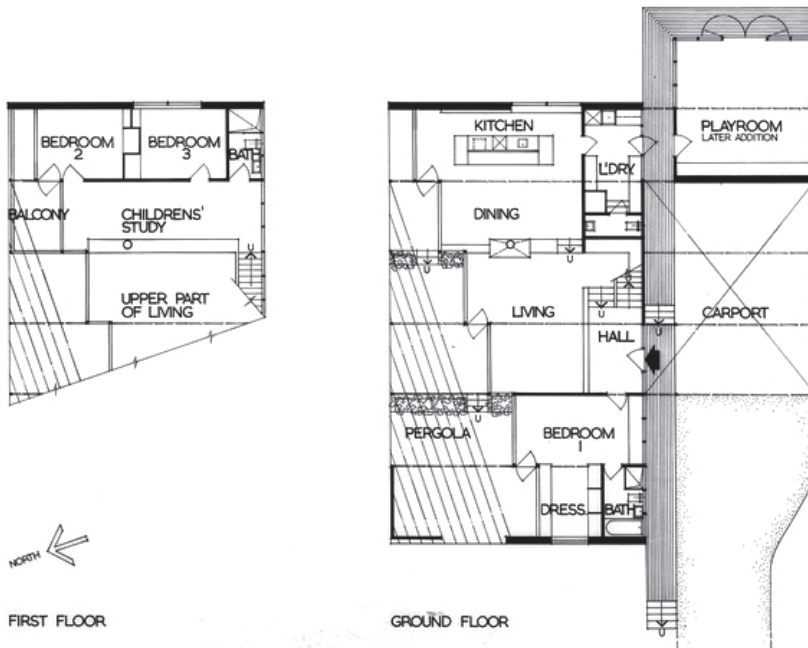


Fig. 8. (opposite page, top) Exterior view of Troedel House, Wheeler's Hill, 1954, by Robin Boyd. Photographer Mark Strzic. 1970

Fig. 9. (opposite page, bottom) Pergola area of Troedel House, Wheeler's Hill, 1954, by Robin Boyd. Photographer Mark Strzic. 1970

Fig. 10. (below) Ground floor plan of Boyd's Troedel House, not to scale

roof is one single pitched cantilever sailing over the entire conglomeration of glass walled rooms, which are held in check by those slender perimeter columns framing the landscape beyond. That landscape, as might be expected, no longer exists but in photographs. The hill upon which the Troedel House was built is now covered in red tiled roofs which crept upward like a “slow but relentless tsunami”;⁵⁸ a sea of suburbia taking the place of the once expansive view. Eventually the house was engulfed by them altogether, and demolished in 1989.

At Boyd’s own house the outdoor space was reversed to become an inner court: a lightly clad, jewel-like sanctuary from the street that contrasted with the heavy outer walls keeping the city at bay. The timber framing was allowed to grow over with vines so that the framed spaces of the house appear to hang off them, rather than the other way around. The cable structure stretched over the court pulls a movable slatted roof over the outdoor spaces: everywhere wires, pulleys, vines, posts and precarious timber balconies. From the court the house appears to dance, as a light timber shelter in the wind or a precarious stage set.

The house is indeed notable for the exposed structural columns and beams that extend from the inside out into the courtyard, becoming the structure that frames the pergola sailing upward from one to two stories over the whole length of the house. The lightness of this overarching roof is juxtaposed with the heavy brick outer walls that insulate the house against the street. The use of continuous materials and planes, particularly roof planes, is not only evident in the Troedel House and at Marsh Street but also in Boyd’s Baker House (1964), in which the unconventional material of compressed straw bound by wire forms the structure of the roof. It sails lightly and with an informal ease over all the heavy rubble slate interior walls, binding the spaces together in a continuous field despite their various delineations in plan.

The sense of sheer verticality in the spaces of Walsh Street also transcends the otherwise rigorous plan, as does the fluidity, visual if not bodily, between the perimeter spaces of the house and the courtyard. The way the spaces are connected point to Boyd’s handling of those “suggestions of far delights not clearly revealed”, visual tricks that he believed could enhance a spatial pattern beyond mere surface treatments so that one would never grow tired of it.⁵⁹

Everywhere structure is delineated and exposed, whether dark purplish brick or timber. There is no cladding over it, in keeping with Boyd’s set against the “cloaking” of forms; yet rather than clinical or functional, the inner sanctions of the house are heavy and sensual in contrast to the lighter treatment of the courtyard and its walls. The materials within the house itself are rich and dark, particularly the brick and the brass and jarrah timber joinery. A blood red carpet has been introduced on the floors to reinforce the sense of warm enclosure. The rooms wrap the courtyard on two levels so that the planting becomes a kind of fourth wall. The outdoor court becomes the core of family life and the rooms the edges, housing the separation of various functions.

The conflict between a garden core and its periphery, or privacy and freedom, was a theme Boyd played with in many commissions, including the Baker House and the Featherston House of 1968,⁶⁰ both also in Melbourne. In the latter, the earth-floored garden was not insulated from the living spaces at all, as they simply floated above and around it. The function of the inner court was the drawing together of those in the house into a private central space of carefully cultivated nature within a public urban setting.

This same sensitivity toward the mediation of private and public thresholds was something that Boyd often liked to address by the use of the blank wall. As he said, “blank is beautiful”.⁶¹ In Jimmy’s Wine bar in Carlton, Melbourne (1962), Boyd modified and conjoined three shop

58 Wilson, *Productive Paradigms*, 77.

59 Boyd, *Living in Australia*, 45.

60 Boyd wrote in 1970: “I have been fascinated for many years with the conflict between the opposed desires of privacy and freedom, between the cell and the great hall, both of which we all need to be able to experience, on our own terms, at our own timing. I have the feeling that ultimate architectural perfections will be achieved in a building of which every part is visible to any viewer at all times while any part is private to any user at any time he wishes for seclusion.” Boyd, *Living in Australia*, 47.

61 *Ibid.*, 127.

terraces using a single white painted brick wall facing the street, punctuated by a series of deep arched openings. Despite the absolute lack of any Featurist decoration, this restrained surface is knowingly inviting. It need not advertise itself, but seems content in repose. The same strategy was used for the façade of Menzies College at La Trobe University Campus, also in Melbourne. These monumental concrete walls, expressing their form as “glass and metal cannot do”, helped protect the building against the western sun as well as having the enjoyable added benefit of being “useful to student protestors for slogan writing with pressure-pack paint.”⁶²

The Walsh Street house was indeed a shared space for his family, but it was also Boyd’s private workspace that held witness to the germination of his ideas. Whether or not he intended it that way, we are tempted to see the intense interiority of the house as a metaphor for Boyd’s avid desire to develop an Australian architecture from within Australia’s heart, rather than through the filtering in of external influences. Always with Boyd there is the steady reinforcement that ideas begin from a space within: whether in the courtyard of the house, or in an intrinsic spirit that radiates outward into the world. Representing the very inverse process to that of the mere pilfering of others’ ideas to fill a hollow and nervous heart, this celebration and protection of the interior is the central theme that seems to grip Walsh Street.

Boyd, like others of his time, was searching for an Australia that was more than an outpost of Britain, and more than an outback myth. He always maintained the belief that it could be found in a general philosophy of architecture, or an overarching theoretical code that would drive the idea of a building to whatever formal end.⁶³ In his writings he glibly identified the Featurist menace in all its small-minded garish horror; but it was predominantly through his built projects that he seemed to offer the antidote to it. For throughout his oeuvre, the twin (and occasionally antithetical) strands of writing and building seemed not to mimic but more to complement one another, as one was always able to penetrate where the other, due to the limits of its language, could not reach.

Whether by means of writing or building, at heart Boyd was searching for an Australian style that was not a veneer, not something pasted on or borrowed but intrinsic and deep-seated: no small and polite lie, but a truth big and frightening and real. I think it is a search that continues, but perhaps that is no bad thing. Like the architectural sketch, the search at least remains potent with possibility. Having kicked off the great south land for the northern hemisphere four years ago now, I must admit that I haven’t quite found it within myself to go back home and join it. But Boyd did. And if he is to be believed, it is within this very search that the “true forms” of architecture will ultimately be revealed:

“Throughout the whole artificial backdrop to everyday life, there are two sources of genuine form. Hand or heart, process or poetry.”⁶⁴

62 *Ibid.*, 127.

63 Boyd reasserts this belief in *The Puzzle of Architecture*, 156.

64 Boyd, *Australian Ugliness*, 140-141.

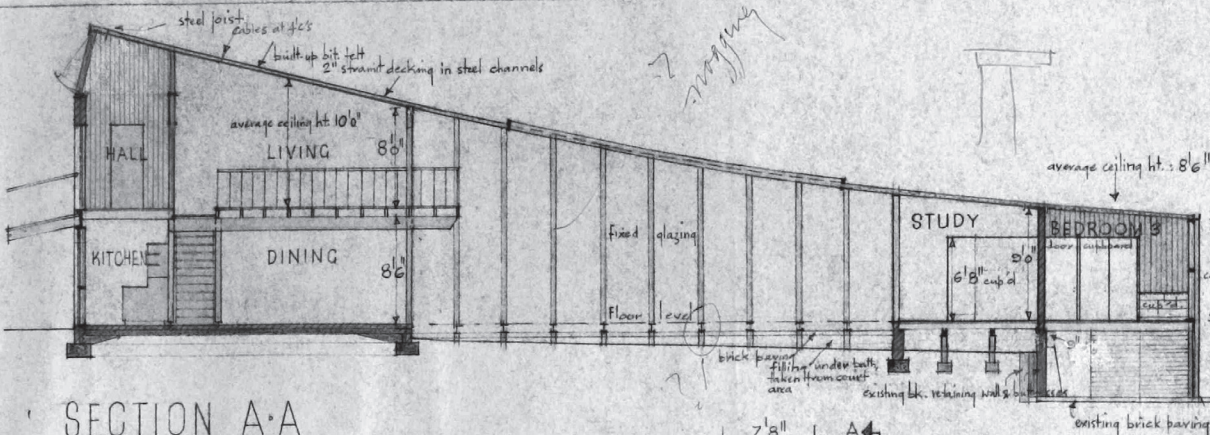
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Fig. 11. Section, ground floor plan and site plan of Boyd’s Marsh Street House, not to scale

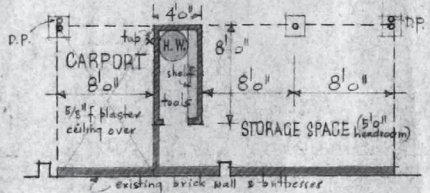
Fig. 12. Internal courtyard of Robin Boyd’s House [with Boyd’s daughter], Walsh Street South Yarra, 1958. Photographer Mark Strizic 1964

Fig. 13. Views of architect Robin Boyd’s House at night [with his family], Walsh Street, South Yarra. Photographer Marl Strizic 1961

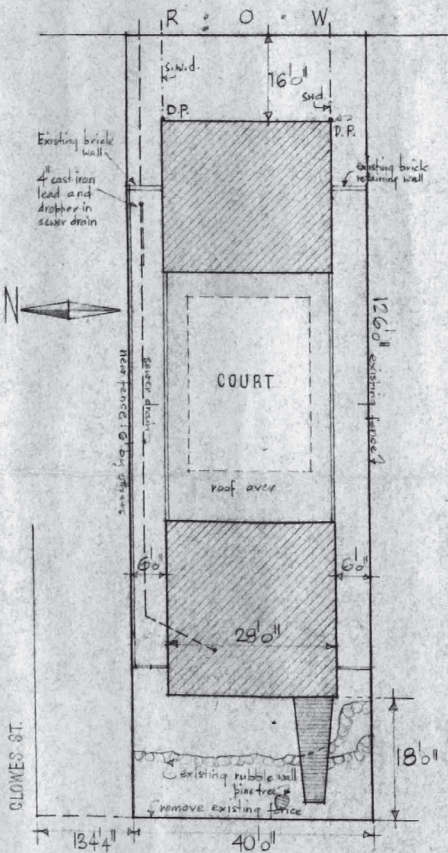
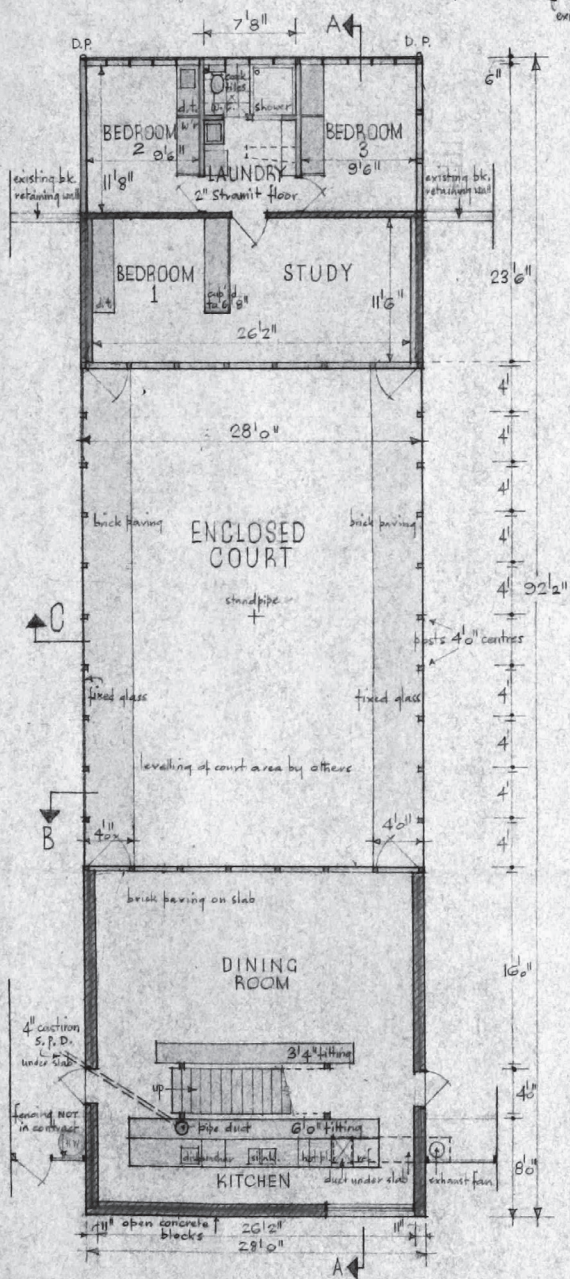
Fig. 14. Robin Boyd House, Walsh Street South Yarra, 1958. Photographer Mark Strizic c. 1960-1970



SECTION A-A



BASEMENT PLAN



PLANS: SITE

GROUND



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