150

An Unfinished Experiment in Living

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Australian Houses 1950-65

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Foreword

Glenn Murcutt

The 1950s in Australian domestic architecture were so exciting for me. It was the period in which I grew up as a budding student architect, visiting the latest houses designed by Peter Muller, Ian McKay, Bruce Rickard and others. With fellow students Keith Cottier, Graham Smart, Robert Bruce and John Smith, I would head off on my Vespa with others on their Lambrettas to the latest site, whether in Palm Beach or Wahroonga. Until that time, the greatest influences on my thinking were Frank Lloyd Wright and Richard Neutra, and also Douglas Baylis and Joan Parry's book *Californian Houses of Gordon Drake* (1956), which I pored over and learned about the beauties of modular construction, open planning and the possibilities of making real connections with the landscape. The Los Angeles Case Study houses were also important. It seemed to me that Sydney was not that much different from California, so the American houses felt strongly part of our place.

Much of the excitement of Australian architect-designed houses came from their limited means, their lack of pretentiousness, and the fact that they were simple, direct and optimistic in outlook. Architects were prepared to experiment and with not much. This made them groundbreaking. Engineer Peter Miller was calculating spans for Harry Seidler's houses that were unheard of. Older than us, Harry designed houses that were very special, different from our preoccupations with materiality and landscape. In Melbourne in 1955, when I was doing my national service at Point Cook, I'd visit, with fellow architecture student and friend Robert Martin, the houses of Robin Boyd, Peter McIntyre, Neil Clerehan and Guilford Bell. The work wasn't crazy – it was good. Even the McIntyres' 'Hills Hoist' house (the Brunt House, House 39) made sense on its precipitous site.

Back in Sydney, I worked full time for Neville Gruzman while studying part time at Sydney Technical College (later the University of New South Wales). At that time Neville was designing some of his best houses – like the Probert, Holland (House 90) and Benjamin houses – and moving from Wright to Japan in his aesthetic interests. During his postgraduate planning studies, Neville shared after-hours office space with Ian McKay, Bruce Rickard and Harry Howard, as well as Bill and Ruth Lucas. It was hard not to be affected by the wealth of ideas and excellent examples around me. Bill and Ruth were working on their minimal Castlecrag house (House 70) when I was in the Gruzman office – it's a true gem. I also admired a house they'd done at Forty Baskets with copious sunshading to the north. I then worked for Arthur Levido and Bill Baker. Bill would go on to design the hugely successful project house the Sunline Home, and both designed excellent small houses for Qantas pilots and engineers – Bill also being a Qantas pilot flying 707s to the United States.

The list of architects designing good, responsible houses from the late 1950s and early 1960s include John Allen and Russell Jack (for whom I also worked), Loder and Dunphy, and Bryce Mortlock, especially his Badham House in Cronulla – I loved its post-and-beam frame blackened with sump oil. There was Bert Read, who worked with Ian McKay and Philip Cox, and also in their office was Polish émigré Andrzej Ceprynski, whose expertise in brick detailing was legendary, with the Tocal College Chapel a superb example. In Brisbane, I knew about the clever, climatically responsive houses of John Dalton and John Railton. At the same time, I appreciated, in a different way, Sydney Ancher's houses, where the shadows of eucalypts fell upon bagged brick walls painted white, almost as if in a painterly way. Here was an artist with his palette: building and landscape drawn together in aesthetic dialogue.

My first house was for champion swimmer John Devitt and his wife Wendy in Beacon Hill (House 106). I knew John because I was also a swimmer, though nothing like him! I designed their house in my sixth year of studies and it was built and finished by September 1962 when I went overseas. It was an important house for me. I learnt that the street was not necessarily the face of the house. It wasn't necessary to show off. Instead, the Devitt House presented a quieter quality to the street: blank brick walls facing west; while on the east side, away from the street, it opened up to the morning sun and a view of the Pacific Ocean. The house was entered through a courtyard, and the bedrooms either faced into the central courtyard or north, so that all internal rooms had a northerly aspect. Privacy, prospect and refuge, and a considered response to climate, were all present there – and it's these qualities I've taken through into all my houses.

For me, 1950 to 1965 was one of the best periods in Australian architecture and has been little recognised as such. Of course, many of these houses today don't comply with our current thermal-performance requirements. But possibly we're looking at these requirements in a narrow way – perhaps instead every household should be given a limited number of kilowatt hours and asked to manage them through the year. This would redefine and shift living habits to minimise energy wastage without being prescriptive. This doesn't make the 150 houses in this book any less interesting or any less challenging. Almost all of them are no-nonsense houses that employ simple materials and direct constructional techniques, and almost all have a sense of spatial modesty. There are lessons here for all of us.

Muller House, Whale Beach, NSW, 1954. Architect: Peter Muller. Photograph: Max Dupain.

Introduction

An unfinished experiment in living

Australia participated in the post–World War II international adoption of modern architecture, notably in community and public buildings such as schools, libraries, hospitals and police stations. But it was in the individual houses by Australian architects that the aspirations and investigations of international modern architecture were most eloquently and skilfully expressed. In responding to the necessary expansion and replacement of existing housing stock, and the accommodation of the baby-boomer generation, postwar architects assisted in making the single-family house a central expression of Australian culture.

The architects of these houses learnt from the experiments in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s, and their later development on the West Coast of the United States in the 1940s and 1950s. They learnt from the domestic work of Frank Lloyd Wright and the architectural fundamentalism of the English New Brutalists. There were also European émigré architects who made new and diverse interpretations of what Modernism might mean in an Australian setting. In addition, earlier examples in Australia of experimental and functional architecture, and of an architecture that engaged with nationalist and regionalist concerns, had a significant influence on the Modernist postwar houses designed for the new suburbs of Australian cities.

Much of the architect-designed housing of this period was developed from a strong social agenda, as an experimental model for a way of living that optimised the Australian climate and site conditions, and aligned itself with

Modernist concerns for spatial continuity, aesthetic rigour, and the innovative use of new materials and technologies. The architects were responsive to the social changes wrought by the introduction of television, and the need for houses to have the capacity to respond to growth and change. Many of the houses were frugal in finish, modest in area, mute in architectural style, but suggestive of a more expansive program of ensuring access to affordable housing, which dignified and maximised the potentials of suburban living.

The unique architectural experiments in Australian housing from 1950 to 1965 remain unassimilated, not yet translated into mainstream housing. Until now, there has been no appropriate analytical framework that would allow such assimilation, nor allow it to be understood as an important contribution to the subsequent development of postwar Australian society and culture.

Modern architecture generated a number of key themes in housing that, in their response to social and technological change, altered the face of Australian suburban living. This book identifies those key themes, including a concern for climatic design issues; enhanced house–site relationships; open planning; accommodating technological change arising from the introduction of the television, home appliances and other consumer goods; the developing use of the car; the changing role and placement of the kitchen; the testing of construction and material innovations; experimentation with new forms arising from international Modernist architectural work and revisiting local house traditions; the development of new typologies such as the courtyard house and the bi-nuclear plan; and the reinterpretation of urban types such as the terrace house.

Because individual houses are, by nature, private, their recording, documentation and public exposure is incomplete. Numerous examples of these houses have been documented as part of an individual architect's oeuvre, but many more remain unexposed. Their collective presentation as an eloquent argument for the pluralist aspirations of the period has not previously been attempted. There has not been a sufficiently rigorous analysis of their connections to the architectural theories of the period, both international and Australian, nor a sufficient evaluation of their place in architectural history. Similarly, there has been no assessment of the role of this modern housing in the developing culture of Australia and its perception of itself.

This book cannot address all of these omissions, but it does attempt an analytical first step through the vehicle of 150 houses that span the period

from 1950 to 1965, selected from across all Australian states and territories. The houses have had their plans redrawn to a common metric scale and style, allowing comparison of both house sizes and amenities over the years as the period moves from austerity to affluence. Each plan is accompanied by a brief description and period photographs that assist in understanding the key design issues being pursued. Five essays, co-written by the three authors, use these 150 houses to expose ideas and themes that are, in themselves, unfinished, still works in progress.

Examined independently, the plans provide a persuasive and engaging history of the period. They are a testament to the skills of the architects involved as they wrestle, initially, with the demands of the individual sites and clients, then with the planning evolution that occurs in response to sociocultural changes brought on by the car and technology, and then with the architectural imperatives of the period.

Why is this useful today? Apart from the desire to document and evaluate this important part of Australian architectural history, the subject of housing in Australia has a particular currency and urgency. We are in a period where housing affordability and lack of diversity in housing types are major concerns. There are very few housing types between the single detached house on its own land and the apartment, and very limited evidence of the market being willing to experiment with alternatives.

The period covered by this book, however, is marked by experimentation, a willingness, in a period of shortages in materials and money, to move outside conventions, to test different house types, different materials, new forms of construction, to push regulations, and to valorise the economical and the small.

Many of the houses built between 1950 and 1965 are located in what are now the middle suburbs of Australian cities, those suburbs that are slated for densification. Of the 150 houses in the book, many have already been demolished. The more modest houses do not provide the level of amenity expected of houses today, in which much of the amenity of the public realm – the well-equipped restaurant kitchen, the billiard table, the karaoke lounge, the cinema, the swimming pool – has been relocated to the private realm of the individual house, making Australia's new suburban housing among the largest in the world.

The necessity of densification will place the remaining houses under threat, although there are useful lessons about density to be learnt from among the 150 selections in this book. While the types are varied, a number of the houses,

particularly the courtyard types (houses 28, 63, 88, 92, 95 and 101), suggest prototypes for housing on smaller lots in more intensified settings, while others (houses 119 and 120) offer more modern approaches to older and denser models such as the terrace house.

The postwar 'new start' mentality, saturated with cautious optimism and a sense of common purpose, provided a fertile base for an architectural profession enthused by the reforming zeal of mid-century Modernism. It marked a relatively short period of strong engagement of architects in the design of housing for 'everyman'. This was exemplified by the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects (RVIA) Small Homes Service, in which architects provided house plans, ready for building approval, that could be bought by members of the public for £5. This Victorian service, although repeated in other Australian states, had the highest profile, being directed for its first six years from 1947 by Robin Boyd, whose public persona grew with the service, and promoted by its collaborator, *The Age* newspaper. And later, in the 1960s, as Judith O'Callaghan and Charles Pickett have written, there was a close and productive alliance between several innovative project-house builders and their selected architects, with the aim of providing well-designed houses that would be accessible and affordable for all Australians.[1]

Robin Boyd was a key and unique contributor to the immediate postwar period in Australia – as a residential architect, as an astute architectural commentator who enjoyed international exposure, and as the first director of the Small Homes Service. His active period overlaps with the fifteen years being studied within this book, and reference to him is therefore frequent.

In 1943, as Sergeant Robin P. Boyd, he contributed to *SALT*, the education journal of the Australian Army, a proposed house design for the returning soldier, 'the typical case of our tentmate: Corporal J. H. Jones'.[2] This modest modern open-plan house was to provide the well-designed new start for the serviceman returning to civilian life. Boyd later contributed regularly to a column in *The Age* newspaper and wrote extensively in journals and books about the role of the architect in Australian society.

As World War II drew to a close, *SALT* published a range of articles on the broad subject of how postwar Australians could be rehoused. *SALT* was not alone. In 1944, Sydney architect John D. Moore published *Home Again! Domestic Architecture for the Normal Australian*, in which he proposed a new postwar approach to housing.[3] Another Sydney architect, Walter Bunning, wrote *Homes*

in the Sun in 1945, in which he critiques contemporary Australian planning and house design, and proposes a range of new climatically responsive designs.[4]

In the same year, the *Australian Women's Weekly* published *Home Plans*, a collection of architect-designed house plans from Australia and America, promoting responsible and modern housing design as an antidote to 'the flood of poorly planned, poorly designed and badly constructed houses that followed World War I'.[5]

Other popular magazines, *Australian Home Beautiful* and *Australian House and Garden*, became strong promoters of Modernist design in the 1950s, and gave generous coverage to modern houses and their architects, bringing this work to a broader public audience. And within the design professions, journals such as *Architecture* (in mid-1955 renamed *Architecture in Australia*, now *Architecture Australia*), *Architecture and Arts*, and *Architecture Today* regularly featured award-winning trendsetting residential designs by the architecture profession's most progressive practitioners. The architect-designed house in Australia was regarded then, as it still is today, as a laboratory of ideas for future living.

These magazines have provided invaluable source material for this book, as has the late Jennifer Taylor's first book, *An Australian Identity: Houses for Sydney, 1953–63* (1972);[6] the PhD theses by Philip Goad, 'The modern house in Melbourne 1945–1975',[7] and Conrad Hamann, 'Modern architecture in Melbourne: the architecture of Grounds, Romberg and Boyd, 1927–1971';[8] and the exhibition catalogue prepared by Geoffrey London and Duncan Richards, *Modern Houses: Architect-designed Houses in Western Australia from 1950 to 1960*.[9] Key sources have also been similar contemporary attempts (published during or immediately after our period of study) to create a national catalogue of housing. Continuing the trend set by George Beiers' *Houses of Australia* (1948), Neil Clerehan's *Best Australian Houses* (1961), Ian McKay and others' *Living and Partly Living* (1971) and Howard Tanner's *Australian Housing in the Seventies* (1976) remain landmark texts of documentation and analysis, and underline the importance of periodically recording the contemporary state of Australian housing.[10]

Since work on this book started some years ago, a number of other publications have emerged on the subject, confirming an ongoing professional and popular interest in surveying the topic of postwar housing in Australia. Almost all have been city- or state-based, however, such as *100 Hobart Houses* (2001),

Cool: The 1960s Brisbane House (2004) and *100 Canberra Houses: A Century of Capital Architecture* (2013).[11] None have attempted, as this book does, a national account of mid-century domestic architecture.

Immediately after the war, reconstruction centred on rehousing returned servicemen and -women. Restrictions in access to building materials and finance provided design challenges, and architects were willing to step in, be part of the collective bunfight, and help tackle these challenges through innovation and experiment. With increasing affluence, however, this imperative began to lapse, and architects, increasingly, were called upon as value-enhancers and stylists before they moved on to larger emerging work in other building types.

It is the case that a tiny percentage of Australia's housing is now designed by architects. Estimates vary between 2 and 4 per cent and, on the evidence of the houses in this book, this low level of involvement can be seen as a lost opportunity to harness available skills to enhance how we live in our houses. Australia is engaged in urban consolidation as a means of limiting urban sprawl and enabling more sustainable cities, and each state has established minimum percentage targets for all new housing to be in the form of urban infill. These targets are not being met, and part of the problem is a lack of clear testing of alternative forms of new housing beyond the apartment type, and the lack of design-led projects that help allay community fears of higher-density housing. This fear is justifiable based on the quality of much of what is being produced, led by the desire to maximise yield and profits rather than design quality.

Design quality is too often dismissed as little more than an aesthetic veneer, but when design skills are fully engaged, they can function to enhance amenity for users, increase sustainability and safety, and reflect our cultural patterns of living.

Architects are needed, again, to have an increased involvement in housing, to be experimental with housing types, to use the higher-density house as a laboratory, as a form of research. The houses in this book are evidence of a period when house design was a way of researching new ways of living, only some aspects of which were assimilated into the broader housing market. The result is an unfinished experiment in living, the title of this book.