Design ethics

By PHILIP COX

Living in Australia. Robin Boyd. Pergamon Press. $6.95.

THE TITLE of this book, the most recent of many on architecture by Robin Boyd, is deceiving. Here Boyd is not dealing with the patterns and problems of living in Australia; rather the book is a handsome collection of photographs of recent residential buildings — houses, motels, Halls of Residence — designed by Boyd, portrayed against his philosophy of architecture.

That Boyd's philosophy is visually orientated is evidenced by his chapter headings — Surface, Space, Structure. Compared to more contemporary philosophies, his approach could be described as being limited. Boyd also includes a chapter called "Spirit," where he deals with the "vision of the architect." Such analysis could again be misinterpreted in an age of computer analysis, of changing physical requirements, function, society and economy. Boyd does not give evaluation in these terms.

The many houses illustrated show Robin Boyd as a creative architect concerned with forms and spaces within his structure. His own house, built in South Yarra in 1958, is a suspension-cable structure hovering over walls of glass and brick. The Gillison House, 1952, is an essay in lightweight materials involving a system of timber braces forming a lively fenestration pattern. The Kaye House, 1966, is a timber box which appears to hover over a brick base with the help of large timber struts, in contrast to the Lloyd House, which is designed in the form of a half crescent.

"The quality of spaces or space contained within the building is the art and the heart of architecture," says Boyd. The book shows that he explores space with the use of varying levels, materials, with transparencies bringing outdoors in and vice versa. This is particularly so in the Featherston House, where he employs a series of platforms or multiple levels over the natural earth containing living plant material. The Marks House (1969) also demonstrates Boyd's control of space where decks and living areas project into the landscape. There is eagerness to sculpt the "negative," and this is the architecture.

Boyd shows control over his materials, particularly the more traditional timber, brick and glass. Timber is used sensibly in the form of light glazing sections between more sturdy structural supports or used for warmth of color in ceilings or walls. Timber is used boldly in the form of trusses in the Portsea Holiday House, 1968, and natural trees as column supports in the Black Dolphin Motel at Merimbula. Stone is used sensitively in the Baker House, where traditional load-bearing walls curve to encompass tanks and stones.

The larger buildings of Boyd seem less successful. The curved roof of the John Batman Motor Inn does not unite well with the rest of the structure; the Domain Park Apartments and the University College, La Trobe University, have not the same ease or accomplishment as his smaller works.

All the buildings illustrated give evidence of Robin Boyd's versatility, and his innate design ethic is never compromised.

The photography and design of "Living in Australia" are the work of Mark Strizic. The overall result is undeniably attractive, but photographs of particular buildings are often difficult to associate with plans or sections. Also, as Boyd argues that the first communication to be received by the normal eye and "just about the most significant" is the color of a building, it is a pity that some of these buildings could not have been illustrated in color.

Perhaps my main argument with Robin Boyd, however, is with his suggestion that "fine-art-architecture has been tossed out" and that "architecture is out of style with the young architects and planners." It may be true that the younger architects do not agree with Boyd's terms of evaluation of architecture, but I feel that there is even more interest in the art of architecture than ever.

Living areas project into the landscape — a house at Mornington by Robin Boyd