

# Our architectural conscience

**R**OBIN BOYD, the nation's architectural conscience, the profession's hair shirt, has been awarded the Gold Medal of the Australian Institute of Architects.

The citation "recognises the many distinguished works of architecture and architectural writing for which Mr. Robin Boyd has been responsible."

The award is the highest honor the institute can bestow and is reserved for outstanding contributions to architecture.

It could be argued that Boyd's main contribution has been not so much to architecture but to the public's appreciation of it.

Boyd's best-known work in this direction is his book *The Australian Ugliness*, which hit a smug suburbia right in the rhododendrons.

In it he shot at just about everything that moved in the Australian environment of the fifties, vituperating fifth-rate design and building standards accepted by the average house-builder and the "leave it to the little lady" attitude of the suburban husband.

He shot at billboards, neon signs, outdoor advertising, tree-toppers, garish used-car lots and the all-pervasive acceptance of anything described as "modern"; at estate agents and land developers; at municipal authorities and the public spirited vandalism so rife in the fifties.

He took the average suburban home to pieces, beginning with the feature fusebox with its pastel painted harlequin pattern and finishing with the cream-and-green color scheme that formed a setting for the design disasters the big stores sold on time payment and labelled "contemporary furnishings."

*The Australian Ugliness* was a virtuoso performance, putting

into words the doubts and fears of a large section of the Australian community, outraging many and jolting the complacency of suburbanites throughout the nation.

The book made Boyd's name — and the term "Australian ugliness" — household words.

But Boyd's work as an educator and a public conscience had been going on for 15 years before *The Australian Ugliness* was published in 1960.

In fact, Boyd's public role began in 1946 when he was the inaugural director of what is believed to be the world's first architectural housing service — the small homes section of "The Age".

## Widely read

The small homes service, run by the Victorian chapter of the Australian Institute of Architects in conjunction with "The Age", gave a 20-year boost to domestic architecture in Australia.

Literally hundreds of thousands of servicemen were returning from the war with their deferred pay, which, with a war-service loan, was enough to build the two-roomed cottage of every soldier's dreams.

Boyd's weekly article, accompanied by an architect-designed plan for a small home, became a widely read and acclaimed feature and established him as one of the nation's avant-garde architects.

During his seven years with the small homes service, Boyd designed the Peninsula House and the Stegbar window — both to have a significant effect on Australian domestic architecture.

The Peninsula House — a semi-prefabricated house featuring several design economies — was the Australian forerunner of the "project" or "display" home, a mecca that has become more

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popular with weekend tourists than a run to the Dandenongs.

Boyd's Stegbar window design for prefabricated windows was a breakthrough in design and building techniques.

Until its introduction, windows had cost more to make than walls, so that window space in the average home was cut to a minimum to save money.

The Stegbar window was cheaper than the wall it penetrated and — quick to see the moral — builders went mad with window walls.

When recovery from this window drunkenness restored the balance, house designers and builders found themselves with a flexible design feature that did much to update Australian domestic architecture.

Leaving the small homes service in 1953, Mr. Boyd joined architects Mr. Roy Grounds and Mr. Frederick Romberg in a partnership that flourished for nine years before the split that occurred when Mr. Grounds was given the job of designing the Arts Centre.

Romberg and Boyd continued in partnership, moving to offices in East Melbourne, where Boyd has virtually run the show since Mr. Romberg was appointed professor of architecture at Newcastle University in 1965.

Architecturally, Boyd is regarded by his peers as an innovator. Some liken him to Burley Griffin in the field of domestic design.

He is certainly versatile, going from domestic architecture in the forties and fifties into institutional buildings in the early and mid-sixties, then becoming involved in exhibition work with the Australian pavilion at Montreal's Expo '67.

Today Boyd is working on the Australian "space tube" for Osaka's World Fair next year. At the same time he is designing a winery for a site in northern Victoria and a "computer manufactory" for an electronics company.

His favorite works, he says, are the ones he is engaged on at the time — although he thinks the Featherstone house, in Ivanhoe, is his best residential design.

Boyd's better-known works include McCaughey Court at Melbourne University (a seven-storey flat block), which won the Victorian institute's citation for the best educational building in 1968, and the Fletcher house at Brighton, which won the citation for the best domestic building this year.

## Make point

Others include Domain Park (Melbourne's first air-conditioned high-rise apartment block), the John Batman Motor Inn, the Black Dolphin hotel-motel at Merrimula, the zoology building at the Australian National University and — still under construction — Menzies College at LaTrobe University.

Robin Boyd is a slim, fair man with keen blue eyes and a disarming smile, which he uses to make a point as much as to indicate amusement.

He is 50 this year, although the inherent fitness of his physical type makes him look years younger.

His father, noted Australian landscape painter Penleigh Boyd, was killed in a motor accident in 1923 when Boyd was four.

Deciding there were enough painters in the Boyd family, his mother directed him towards architecture through his early education at Glamorgan Preparatory School and later at Malvern Grammar.

After studying architecture at Melbourne Technical College, Boyd served his arted pupilage under Kingsley Henderson, one of Melbourne's leading — and most trenchant — architects.

Boyd is keenly aware he is a branch of "The Boyds", a creative Australian family ranking with the Lindsays in artistic achievement.

Although he did not follow his father or his cousins (Arthur and David) in painting, his approach to architecture is visual.

"I feel strongly that architecture should finish with a very strong visual image," he says. "I suspect the word 'beauty'. It's open to many interpretations.

"But any building project that starts with the idea of getting a strong visual result will give a result which in the end is shallow."

In short, he believes the architect's job is to resolve the structural, functional and economic problems of a building in a way that gives "a strong visual impression."

He is aware of his reputation as a critic and chronicler but describes his writing as "nothing more than a hobby . . . a night-time thing.

"I see myself as a practising architect so outraged by the things about me that I feel obliged sometimes to write about them."

On Australian architecture: "There is no longer a national style or distinctiveness. There are, of course, regional differences, but the ideal is international.

"We are not terribly up to date in Australia. We are isolated from the main currents of world architecture and this makes us look a bit out of date to international visitors.

"But while we are behind the world's architectural leaders, we are galloping to catch up."

And Robin Boyd is applying the spurs.