

Building on dangerous principles

THIS IS a beautifully produced book but I have two major reservations about it in spite of the fact that it illustrates some very fine buildings.

The first is that it does not really deal with living in Australia but with a very special group of dwellings designed by Robin Boyd.

The second is that I disagree rather fundamentally with most of Robin Boyd's theoretical views on architecture.

Thus, while a review like this may not seem the place to engage in theoretical argument, this becomes essential. It should be pointed out that architects have often disagreed with each other and still agreed about what they liked.

Let me say at the outset that I like and admire most of the dwellings illustrated and believe that they form a major contribution to Australian architecture.

But architectural criticism should go beyond likes and be in two stages: First, whether the designer has met his objectives; and then, whether one agrees with these objectives and their theoretical foundations.

Robin Boyd has met his objectives brilliantly in most cases, but I cannot agree that these objectives have much validity as a generalisation about architectural theory. It will, therefore, be necessary to consider buildings and theory separately.

Most of the buildings illustrated are houses and it is significant that they, and several other buildings (of which more later) are more successful, in my view, than the few larger buildings. The reason for this is at the heart of my theoretical disagreement with Robin Boyd.

In his afterword (which clearly examines Boyd's role in Australian architecture) David Saunders comments on the long and relaxed conversations which Robin Boyd has with his clients. Also his clients come to him because they know his work.

LIVING IN AUSTRALIA, by Robin Boyd, design and photography by Mark Strizic, Pergamon Press, \$6.95.

By **AMOS RAPOPORT**

There is, therefore, an intimate designer-client relation where a brilliant architect and a willing client can solve the latter's specific problems and together produce a great house.

I begin to have some qualms about situations where this intimate and leisurely relationship cannot exist — and it cannot in most buildings today. One can then no longer hope that a sensitive designer can intuitively grasp all the necessary data from a co-operative client with whom he shares many values.

What happens when the architect designs for unknown users, or for people whose life style and values he has not experienced and with which he may not sympathise?

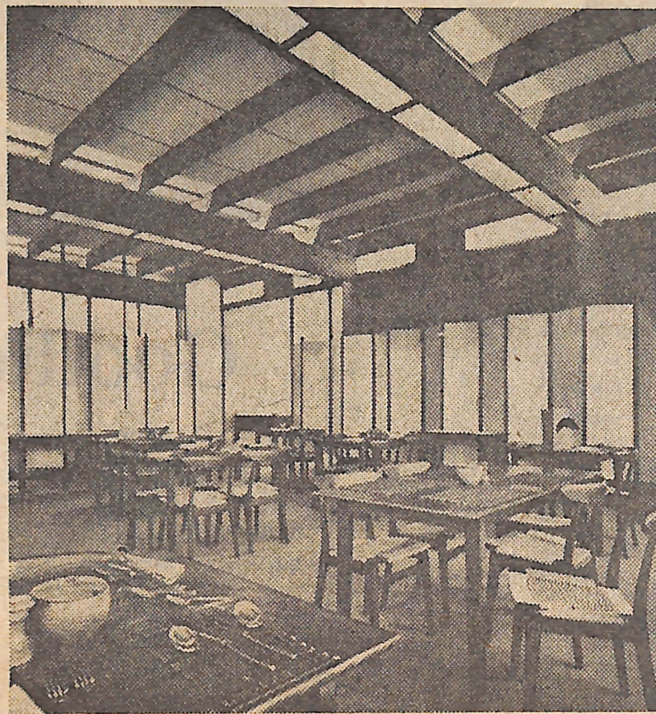
One such building type is illustrated, although briefly — some student housing. It may be that these particular examples work well, but that cannot be judged from the photographs.

There is much recent work on what students need and want, on the different student sub-cultures, on the use of space and time by different student groups and their activity patterns, on the relation of such housing to the total life-space of the users. These analyses suggest a very different approach to that apparent from the book.

Such a building can neither be designed without such analysis — nor can it be evaluated or even discussed without much more data than the book provides, or even than one would get by visiting the building.

I believe that we need a much more scientific study of the needs of specific groups of users and that each building can be seen as an experiment which must be studied to see whether the assumptions embodied in it are borne out.

Similarly one needs to study



DINING ROOM at the Black Dolphin Motel: the theory worked here.

many of the "intangibles" of architecture. One no longer needs to assume that given variables have certain effects on people, or what a building or space communicates to people, and to what extent given arrangements affect behavior and mood and in what ways. These things are becoming known.

This knowledge need not inhibit the designer. Only by knowing these things can he achieve, and be sure that he has achieved, his objectives. The intuitive leap is still there but it is based on a much deeper and wider set of information from a number of disciplines newly involved in design and, in many cases, even new disciplines.

This is not a threat to the designer but an essential help if he is to do his job. From such information different designers will still produce different designs but all based on sound knowledge. I am sure that Robin Boyd would do better than others in giving substance to such data. His own approach works (for

someone of his ability) with the houses, with the Black Dolphin Hotel at Merimbula, NSW, and other buildings of this type. I seriously doubt that it works with student housing and know that it would not work with other building types.

With all our disagreement it is clear that Robin Boyd's contribution to architecture — as a designer and writer — is unquestioned and great. It is good that this book provides a collection of his work and that he has once again clearly and fearlessly stated what he believes.

If we read and ponder what he says it will clarify many issues in the same way that the buildings he has designed will show, as they have shown, in what mean and unsatisfactory dwellings so many of us live.

The photography is as fine as we have come to expect of Mark Strizic — but, like most architectural photographs, they show the buildings in a pristine state, rather than as used,