

HOME

INDOOR & OUTDOOR LIVING

Edited by JOHN McLAGAN

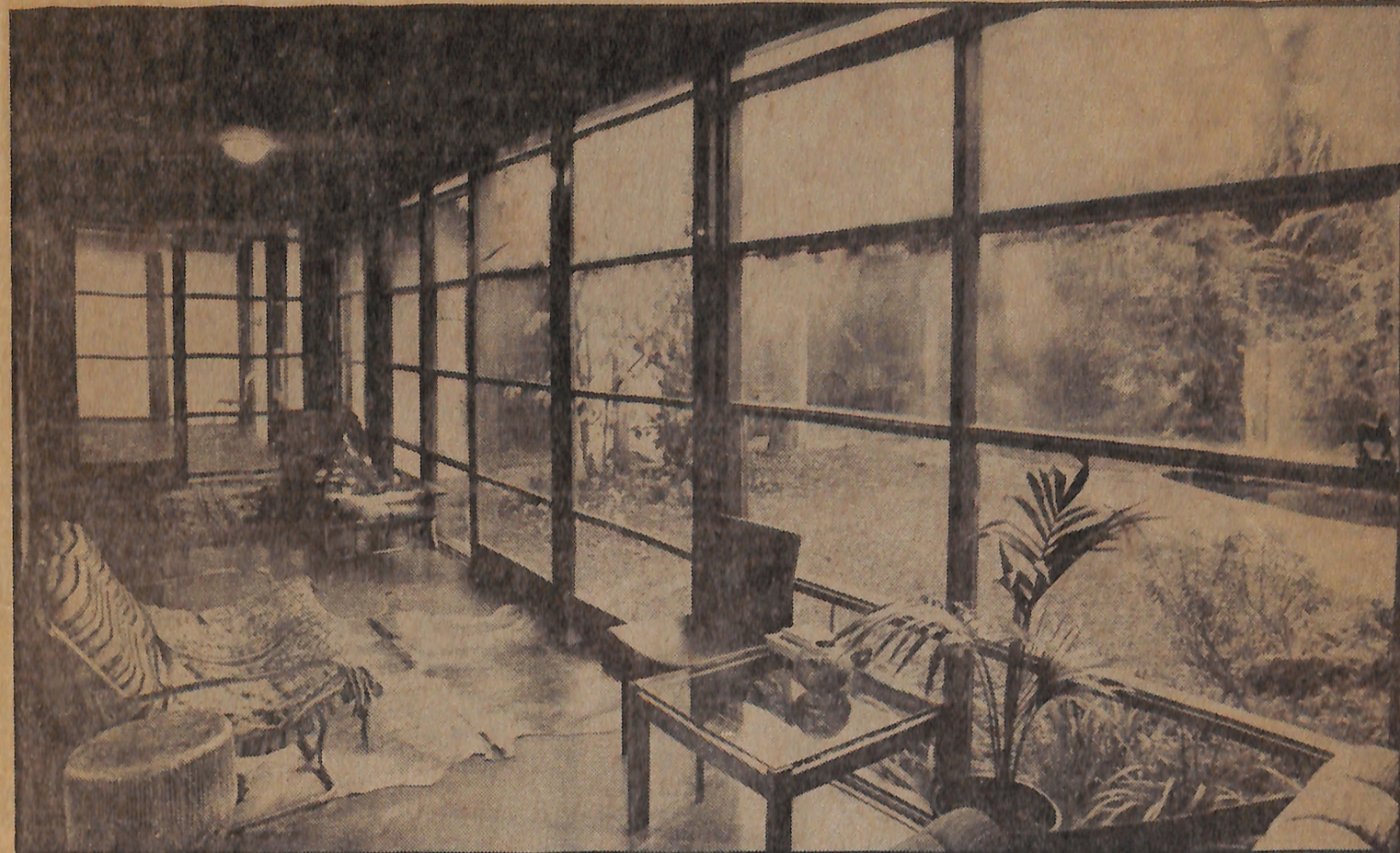
Picture: NEIL NEWITT

FOREVER BOYD

Robin Boyd was fiercely critical of pretentious design in Australian houses — and he designed the sort of simple, livable houses he thought we should have. JOHN McLAGAN looks at how they apply today.



Robin Boyd: "In the land of the free, the houses of the free were straight-laced, smug."



The living room looks across a courtyard with a Japanese air: "really lovely to live in — it has got a great quality of light".

ON APPROACHING this Robin Boyd house down a steepish, clay and gravel driveway there is an odor of wet gums and a feeling of slight disappointment: "Is this all there is?" Below stands a disarmingly simple, flat-roofed structure of timber and fibro-cement painted two shades of grey.

It is not until it envelops you that a subtle sense of appreciation begins to take hold. The path wanders through a carport and down the side of a courtyard with a faintly Japanese air. Progress draws you through a sliding glass door into two big spaces that are joined, or separated, by a series of sliding glass screens.

These are big spaces, open and sunny with the screens aside, warm and intimate with them drawn. They consist of a simple living room with a brick fireplace, a dining room half cut off with a timber divider, and an ante room of glass and timber that traps the sun from the west.

Floor-to-ceiling windows in the living room offer a glimpse of the Yarra through the gums, and beyond, still a long way off, an approaching suburbia — the ugliness that so worried Robin Boyd.

Standing in front of the open fire, the owner explains that Boyd designed the house, as he designed all of his houses, as a place to live in. This one "is really lovely to live in — it has got a great quality of light".

It was built in 1961 after Mr Boyd visited Japan to write about the Japanese architect Kenzo Tange, and shows strong Japanese influences. "Japanese architecture emphasises the people who live in the houses. Robin Boyd was criticising Australia's need for featurism at the time," said the owner.

This house amply demonstrates his

'The style of Featurism . . . is the evasion of the bold, realistic, self-evident, straightforward answer to all questions of design and appearance in man's artificial environment.

'To hide the truth of man-made objects the Featurist can . . . cloak and camouflage.

Cloaking of common materials has always been a favorite practice in Australia.'

— ROBIN BOYD
'The Australian Ugliness'

dislike of unnecessary adornment. Honesty is the key — everything is lightly polished, natural timber, brick, cement sheet and the same two tones of grey, the color chosen by Mr Boyd to blend with the gums and repainted since — the owners have changed "not a thing". "Mother always called them Robin Boyd brown," said the owner.

The original modular design of 28 squares included four bedrooms (including a flat below), two bathrooms and two shower rooms — no fights over where to wash on a busy morning! There is also a coolroom: the owners shop at the Victoria Market and stock up.

A huge gum appears almost to grow out of one of the lower corners of the house, which is on a steeply sloping block — single storey at the front and double at the back. The tree was there when the house was built and was part of Mr Boyd's vision for the design.

The tree is now a source of delight as the owners watch a variety of small native birds go about their business just a

metre or so from the breakfast table window.

ROBIN Boyd was the articulate architect. He described himself as an architect that "scribbled at night", but he was a substantial and serious practitioner in both fields.

His views of domestic architecture were not kind. He saw it as "unashamed superficiality . . . nothing could be more formal and restrictive to spatial flow than the prim nature of suburban convention".

"In the land of the free, the houses of the free were straight-laced, smug. Even such an elementary pleasure as a chair in the afternoon sun, with a french window open to the lawn was banned: grass would be carried indoors and trodden into the carpet".

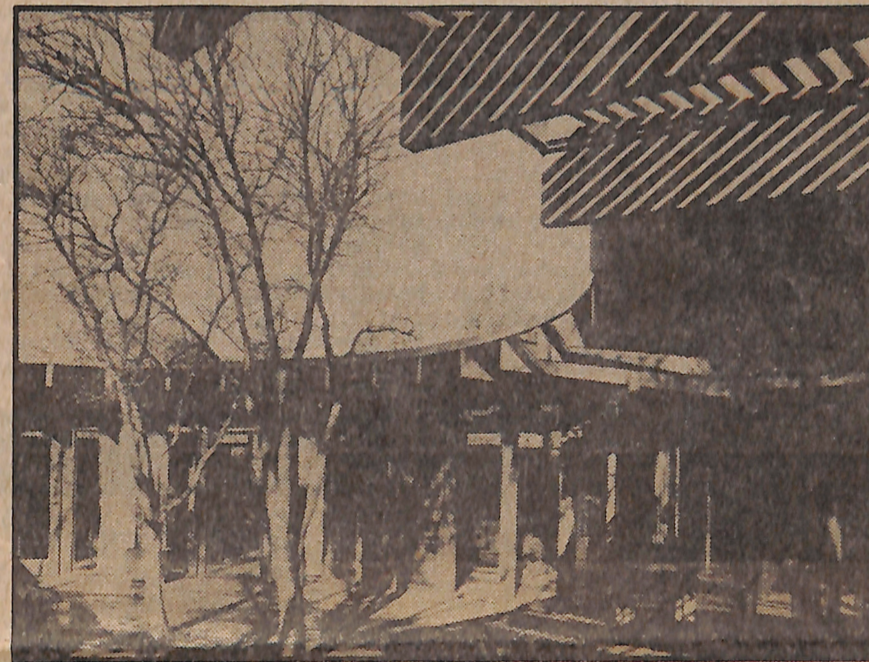
'The little man has always been able to build his house without calling on the services of an architect. A builder and a scribble on the back of the dentist's bill was enough.'

This was the basis of bad design. He wrote in his first book 'Australia's Home' in 1952 that "Australia is the small house". He began the Small Homes service in 1947 so that Mr and Mrs Average would have access to good architecture. The service is still available today through the architect advisory service, Archicentre. Plans and specifications to a standard range of houses cost from \$500 to \$1200. Archicentre can be reached on 819 4577.

Mr Boyd was 52 when he died in 1971. The architect Sir Roy Grounds said at the time that Mr Boyd had the approach of "a knight in shining armor".

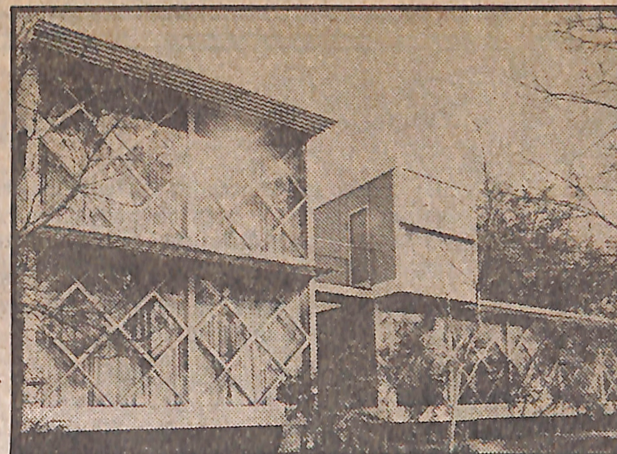


A huge gum at one corner of the house was an important part of Boyd's vision.



LEFT and BELOW LEFT: Two of Robin Boyd's houses. Honesty in design to be lived in.

Pictures: MARK STRIZIC



A conference to mark celebration

To celebrate its 10th anniversary, the architecture magazine 'Transition' has organised a conference to debate his contribution to Australia's architecture and general culture. It will include an exhibition of his published works and a free public lecture by Dr Conrad Hamman in the Great Hall of the National Gallery on Friday. Papers from the conference, which will continue over the weekend, will also be published. Details from Transition on 660 2821.