

University of the Air

DESIGN IN AUSTRALIA

2: The home

VIDEO

Titles

Studio:

3 big blown-up
photographs: 1, a
classic colonial
homestead; 2, a
country farm house;
3, a modern suburban
villa. Open with
colonial homestead
as background to
Boyd standing.

AUDIO

Theme

Boyd: In this series we are investigating
three questions: First, is the idea of
an Australian national style valid in
these days of cosmopolitan culture?
Second, if it is, do we have one? Third,
if we do, is it good?

Now, countries earn their own national
styles - if they do at all - in the same
way that people gain personal character.
Not by trying to have it. Simply by
pursuing naturally and with integrity
the things they are most interested in.

Film: Australian

football action

dissolve to swimmers,
to Manly lifesavers,

to skyline,

to housing estate.

Sports music.

Australia's possession of a sense of
unique style in several activities in
which she is interested is unquestioned.

But does she have style in the visual
or artistic sense in the design of any
parts of the man-made environment of
her modern life?

If she does at all we could expect to
find it in fields of production or
manufacture which come closest to the

Zoom in to villa.

Australian heart. And what comes closer than - home.

Suburban street scenes, featuring houses, families.

The concept of a private home for every family is not of course an Australian idea. It was proclaimed first as a health measure by Queen Elizabeth 1 in 1592. Still, after taking this idea from Britain, Australia went one better and added the recommendation that this home should be not just an apartment but a separate structure standing in its own private garden. And today Australia has about the highest proportion in the world of these private, separate dwellings.

Long shot of housing estate.

Studio: Boyd shows books of plans, etc., on desk.

The design, or the plan - the room arrangement - of this separate dwelling is something in which most Australians evince more than usual interest, since the long drawn out purchase of one such object is usually the biggest financial adventure in an Australian's lifetime.

Has Australia, then, a national style of house?

The answer is no. Not one, but several.

The first is the classic...

Camera moves in to colonial homestead in studio, roves

Lyrical music.

The Old Colonial homestead. A spreading

over details:

roof,

verandah,

french windows,

doorway.

single storey. A low wide roof of eucalypt shingles twisting and splitting into a texture of soft silver grey tweed. A wide verandah; flagstones worn smooth as soap on the thresholds. French windows with louvred shutters painted apple green throwing striped shadows on white-washed walls. Twelve-pane sashes, semicircular fanlights and six-panel doors, all set in symmetry and washed over with nostalgia.

Back to desk.

Boyd with

Hardy Wilson book.

No architecture, no design, no works of art in Australia's history have stirred up so much sentiment as the homesteads of the 1830's. in New South Wales and Tasmania: the finest flowering of the Old Colonial Style.

Hardy Wilson
drawings (R.B. can
supply),
dissolve between

Hardy Wilson, the sensitive, eccentric architect-artist whose famous book of drawings and prose in 1924 first awakened 20th C. Australians to the wonderful heritage of the early architecture, dipped his pen in sweet eucalyptus oil and wrote:

"

"The pioneer squires chose serene summits on which to place their homesteads.

"

...Selecting the tallest hill upon estates presented by the Crown, they built with taste and imagination, settling their white-walled homes like snowflakes fallen on cushions of verdure.

"

dissolve between

"

Flips

Photographs of Old
Colonial houses
- dissolving
between.

English Georgian
house,

The Parthenon.

Australian homestead
- general view.

Dissolve to

American Colonial
house - matching
last shot if possible.

Tranquillity surrounded them... Here
lingered a style, simple and stately,
although of humble execution, which we
call 'Old Colonial'. There is a charm
about the name, 'Old Colonial', which
recalls broad eaves, white paint, and
hospitable porches, set amidst sunshine
and history..."

There is no question about the beauty,
the simple dignity, the repose and the
charm of the old Australian homesteads.

But how Australian were they?

Well, in the essential matters of structure
and style they were not Australian at all.
Their structural techniques of brick walls
and timber roofs and floors were
traditional European. The architectural
style was the one we call Georgian - that
is, the simplified and domesticated end
product in England after centuries of
evolution, decline and renaissance, of
Grecian/ Roman classical architecture.

Yet in Australia it was never quite the
same. After all, England exported the
Georgian style all over its Empire, and
wherever it took root the local soil
coloured and adapted it slightly. This
is American (Southern States) Colonial
- and how different from ours: a
vertical instead of a horizontal style;

high instead of low and wide; timber instead of brick and stone; great plump columns up two storeys instead of the delicately thin, single-storey Australian ones.

More Old Colonial
details.

Even the long, low, wide, ubiquitous verandah was no Australian invention. It too began in Rome, was not unknown in England, and was strongly developed by Empire builders in India before Australia was born.

Nevertheless this land, its geography, its stones and its hard, perverse timber did have a profound effect - especially its geography.

Single-storey house.

The characteristic single storey developed under several influences. There was no need to conserve ground space. The hard ground discouraged the digging of cellars; and why dig them when the winter was so mild? The lack of lime at the beginning made for weak walls which sometimes collapsed in the rain, even when only one storey high. Why try to build two?

Detail: windows.

The tall windows, practically down to the floor and opening vulnerably almost to ground level were possible because there was no threat of invasion from outside and less threat than usual in a new country of dangerous animals or unpleasant human marauders.

Lonely house.

For the same reason it wasn't necessary for the houses to huddle together in villages for mutual protection as, for instance, in the North American Colonies. Instead each big house was virtually self-contained with a little village of storehouses and servants round the rear courtyard.

Courtyard.

In New South Wales, at least, the only aggressor was the summer sun, and the verandahs and the shutters took care of this.

Shutters.

So the Australian homestead style developed - with quite extraordinary speed after the First Fleet. It was a patrician style as were most of the people who owned and built it. The homestead style belonged to privilege, not to the people of that tough convict colony. Nothing about it was unique to Australia. Yet it was a sensible, functional amalgam of those elements of Georgian architecture which suited the new conditions and materials encountered here. So even if Australia did not invent any part of it, we made the whole our own.

Interior - with people.

Studio: Boyd refers to backdrop 1, of homestead.

Here is an Australian image or symbol: a man-made object, an architecture with some qualities reflecting the nation

itself: isolated, extroverted, independent, unpretentious to a fault. There may be other places in the world where one might come across by coincidence a similar image of a lonely, serene house, verandah-shaded, single-storeyed, horizontally stressed in just these gentle proportions - but wherever they occur they always mean Australia, as surely as the gum-tree or the kangaroo and probably more than any other object made by man. This was as close to ideal Australian design as we are ever likely to get. European in origin of course, as we ourselves are; but adapted, coloured, bent by Australia's character.

Move in on
backdrop.

It was extraordinary how soon such a strong symbolic image emerged - and how few to equal it came after. But it was easier in the old days for Australian native influences to exert themselves - before the homogenising, levelling influences of the Industrial Revolution made themselves felt.

Music break.

The homestead style split into two as the colonies grew up in the middle of the 19th Century. It split into country and city types - and each of them now were homes for ordinary

General studio shot
showing backdrops
2 and 3 - the
farmhouse and

suburban villa behind
Boyd.

Move in to
farmhouse in
background.

Follow details.

citizens rather than the semi-palaces
of the privileged.

The country cottage - the ordinary
farmhouse - was a poor man's version
of the homestead, with even fewer
pretentious and classical references.
Its verandah columns became square
posts. Its windows shrank. Its roof
changed from shingles to corrugated
iron which shed its water into corrugated
tanks among a cluster of appendages at
the back. Its walls changed from
masonry to weatherboards. The paint
colours were almost unvarying: strong
green for the roof, pure white for the
walls - a fresh and welcoming combination
as characteristic of bush hospitality
as a teapot.

The farmhouse also made a characteristically
Australian image and at its best had
almost as much charm as the homestead.

But it was not consciously designed.
It evolved. Often enough it was built
by the farmer himself, or by an itinerant
self-trained builder. It just grew in
the paddocks like the windmills and
fences and silos.

It was Australian. It was good. But
it has hardly any more relevance to our
complex modern society than an aboriginal
grass hut. It was just a

charming primitive.

Boyd.

The city type called itself a 'villa', and sank gradually into less respectable city ways. It took a liking to cheap jewelry and went through a series of fashionable costumes. New-rich men of the gold rush and the land booms shopped the world for decorative tricks in which to dress their mansions. If they had any relevance or meaning for Australia this was purely coincidental.

Flips:

Boom style house.

Another.

In the course of evolution and decline the town house did go through one phase which became characteristically Australian. That was the cast-iron frill phase.

City view of last century.

Series of terraces.

Between 1860 and about 1885 the bigger cities grew fast and they grew compact. In Sydney and Melbourne countless rows of terrace houses were built, and a great number of them - in Melbourne virtually all of them - were ornamented with cast iron in pretty lacy patterns stuck to the posts and beams of the front verandahs. It was cheap and successful decoration. The thin, delicate lace-work, and especially its shadows, gave an elegance to the streets of Carlton, Woolloomooloo and East Melbourne that is actually admired today even more than it was in its own day.

How Australian was this work?

Not much. The idea and the iron itself came from England at first. From 1860 on it was made in Australia, but even then many of the patterns were imported from England.

However, local designers were sometimes given an opportunity, and they sometimes expressed their desire to strike some sort of a blow for Australian independence by introducing native flora and fauna into the thick scumbles of iron.

(How Australian is a cast-iron cockatoo?)

This was the beginning of a long line of built-in domestic Australiana.

Terra-cotta tile roofs eclipsed slate and iron in the 1890's. Their gable ends were usually decorated by foreign dragons. But some were more conscious of their own continent.

(How Australian is a terra-cotta kangaroo?)

The somewhat hysterical design of houses in the early 1900's had no more relevance to Australia than the name that was inaccurately given to this style:

Queen Anne.

Details of cast-iron terraces.

Move in to close-up: iron cockatoo.

L.S. of house.

C.U. kangaroo.

House in Royal Parade, long shot.

C.U. Australiana
fretwork.

Yet even Queen Anne was impressed that a new nation had just been federated out of separate colonies, and she occasionally dressed for the occasion.

(How Australian is a fretwork koala?)

Studio.

None of these frozen bits of built-in animals were in fact much more Australian than the foreign dragons they replaced in the decoration. They were pretty trivial and naive ornaments, and they never quite jelled with the imported shapes to which they were stuck. They didn't convince anyone that they were genuine Australian, and soon they were dropped altogether.

Flips:

Californian,
Spanish,
Tudor.

The Australian house next toyed with California Bungalow Style, Spanish Mission, Tudor and various other exotic ornamental devices having nothing to do with Australia.

Then about the time of World War 2 it began to undergo rather more fundamental changes.

Early European
Modern house.

The international modern movement in architecture caught up with it. This European-based movement was often called the 'International Style' and in its early days it did tend to threaten all regional characteristics and to regiment

everyone into white boxes.

It had two effects on Australian houses.

It - and certainly the Depression helped this too - had a most healthy influence towards simplicity and honesty upon the ordinary builder's vernacular. The rather mad parade of exotic fashions, changing every five years or so, practically stopped in 1940. Since then the evolution of the domestic idiom has carried on with surprisingly little interference from abroad.

Rather like the primitive, traditional farmhouse, an Australian suburban home style has developed without too much trained design assistance, almost entirely without the aid and outside the orbit of the architectural profession.

Ads. and pamphlets
for houses.

Row of new houses
with unmade street.

Of course the business of building and selling houses is quite a taxing rat race. There are builders who resort to so-called 'American Colonial' atmospherics, and modernistic gimmicks. But despite them, despite all the pictures of American-style domestic bliss fed to us in movies, magazines and television, the Australian domestic vernacular continues stubbornly along its own unmade road. Here then is

Studio with No. 3

background.

another real Australian image. This villa is where the average Mr. and Mrs. Australia and their $2\frac{1}{2}$ children live. This is the style, despite variations in size and the fact that local regional regulations and materials may subtly change its details and colours. And this style, this design, is not to be found anywhere else in the world. It is so very different, for instance, from the average American house despite the occasional claims of its builders.

Let's examine it for the Australian characteristics.

Move into
background
picture and
follow
details.

First of all, its name: a home, when others call it a house.

Second, the fact that it is a one-family house and not a flat like Mr. and Mrs. Europe's dwelling.

Third, its single storey, inherited from earliest days.

Fourth, the compact, tight-fisted plan - no ranch-style sprawl here: the smaller the perimeter the cheaper to build.

Fifth, the roof tiles. Marseilles pattern, they are called, because the

first ones came from Marseilles in 1886. But for nearly 80 years they have been made in Australia. Few other places in the world have ever seen them. Marseilles itself hardly uses them.

Sixth, the walls. Brick veneer. We never appreciated timber, as colonial America did, largely because our timber is not so responsive as America's. Instead we put a snob value on bricks, and when they got too expensive we devised a characteristic economy: we reduced the brick to a veneer. And to avoid the monotony of red bricks we have invented means of colouring bricks more varied than any others in the world.

Seventh, the external chimney. It never gets so cold here that we have to add central heating or to conserve every ounce of heat by wrapping the houses around a central fireplace. So we put the chimney on an outside wall where it loses much of its warmth to the night air but is a symbol of cosiness.

Eighth, the colours. Brown. Red. Terra-Cotta. A touch of Canary. Everything tending to the warm range of the spectrum, but with touches of navy blue and baby blue. We rarely use the kind of paint which most other communities seem to think is the only

kind available: plain white.

Film of suburban
living: interiors.

Inside this house there are other Australian things - not unique but characteristic - the shower, the stainless-steel kitchen sink, fibrous-plaster walls and ceilings, a slow-combustion space-heater - but these we shall look at later.

The questions we are investigating now are: Is there an Australian style of house? and If so, is it good?

Children in garden
- house in rear.

The answer to the first question must be yes. Nowhere else can you find anything like this villa. The answer to the second is more difficult. It depends on what level you are discussing it.

Street scene,
suburban activities:
gardening, boys
bicycling, woman
going shopping.
All in good
residential area
- no shops - always
featuring similar
houses in background.
Attractive atmosphere,

Compared with the housing that most nations offer their people, of course it is good. It is convenient for the sort of suburban family life lived in it, and it adds new mechanical conveniences sparingly to keep up superficially with technology. It is not ornamented, unless you call the Marseilles-pattern tiles and the vivid colour of the bricks ornaments in themselves. It owes its present simplicity to a fashion inspired by the modern movement, just as it owed

but not glamorised.
Spanish Mission house
at end.

the barley sugar columns which once it
wore to the Spanish Mission fashion.
It has no strong feelings about these
visual things. Undoubtedly it will
change again soon in response to some
other exotic fashion.

Studio.

As a social phenomenon, a vernacular
style of building that has evolved
through the years, the Australian
suburban villa is unquestionably good
- even a social triumph of goodness.
Just let us not for a minute confuse it
with objects of conscious design, of
art, of architecture - which is the
subject of another programme.

End titles.

Theme up.