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Dear Patricia,

Could I seek your help? I have written a preface to a proposed reprint of "Australia's Home" and would be most grateful if you could read it and point out any inaccuracies or injustices - no doubt there are some, indeed there may be many but I hope not.

Kind regards

Sincerely

Geoffrey Blainey

PREFACE TO AUSTRALIA'S HOME

(Penguin Books)

When this book first appeared in the windows of Australian bookshops a quarter of a century ago, it dazzled some alert readers and quietly captured many others. There was something dashing and original about his style and argument but there was also a tidy elegance and an effortless mastery of evidence which made some critics minimise the importance of Australia's Home.

It was as if Robin Boyd, appearing in his first test match, had made a century before lunch, and had made it so unostentatiously that spectators blinked in disbelief. Perhaps, after all, the scoreboard was inaccurate, or lunchtime came late, or the game was not really a test match. The last was the gnawing doubt, because Robin Boyd was writing about the ordinary Australian house - its outside and inside, its builders and occupiers - when that theme was not yet seen as crucial by those who were trying to understand Australia's past and present.

"Australia is the small house", he wrote firmly in the preface in 1952. He can't be that serious, thought many cultural critics and historians. In their eyes, Australia in 1952 was not the small house where the average family spent much of their life and expressed their taste, sentiment and ideologies: Australia instead was really the big house of the parliaments and governors where <sup>politicians</sup> ~~people~~ struggled for power. ~~It's fair to say that~~ Robin Boyd <sup>however,</sup> assumed that what the people did was more important than what was done in the name of the people. He was a social historian - writing one of the most illuminating pieces of social history yet produced - when political history was the vogue in Australia. <sup>Furthermore</sup> He was ~~also~~ studying the small house in a wide context when the big house in a narrow context was a more popular topic of comment and interpretation. He was a long way ahead of his time, ~~too far ahead to be appreciated adequately.~~

Robin Boyd must have completed writing the book when he was about thirty one. He was then directing the "Small Homes Service" at which the public could buy cheap copies of plans drawn by Victorian architects, and he was writing a weekly article on house design in The Age newspaper - short essays which ~~eventually~~ became so popular that thousands of people began to see Melbourne through his eyes, and to discuss its outer suburbs in his phrases. As he had lost most of the war years - he served in New Guinea - and as he himself was practising as an architect as well as journalist, he cannot have had a great deal of time for formal research on the ~~origins of the~~ small house or the changing habits of its inhabitants. But he looked about him as he walked or travelled in tram or train; and he gathered knowledge and clues from street hoardings, old architectural drawings, old journals, magazines and newspapers, government <sup>reports</sup> ~~papers~~ and official statistics. By intuition or thought, he often reached <sup>these</sup> ~~the~~ general

conclusions which come now in massive detail in doctoral theses.

When, much later, the growing crop of architectural historians used his book and students called on him to enquire how he knew about this trend or that innovation, he would quietly smile - he had a quick, disarming smile - and say genuinely that he doubted whether he could help them. <sup>On occasions he would</sup> ~~It is impossible~~ ~~to discuss mental processes which took place quickly and even unconsciously,~~ <sup>disarmingly cheerfully</sup> ~~years ago.~~ <sup>agree that</sup> Some of his conclusions or explanations about Australian social or building practices were swift asides or hunches which have since been discarded, and <sup>that</sup> some of his comments on the characteristics of Australian men or women, dogs or cats, were useful quarter-truths rather than weighed judgments. But the magnitude of his contribution is beyond dispute.

~~In this book~~ He made a <sup>brilliant</sup> ~~bold~~ attempt to divide the history of Australia's home into eleven categories or steps of stylism - the categories ranging from Georgian Primitive through to the post-war L Shape, and included <sup>ing</sup> that beautifully-named style of the 1930s, "Waterfall Front". ~~It~~ <sup>It</sup> was this typology which persuaded ~~and provoked~~ one of the country's few ancient historians to turn increasingly to the study of the history of domestic architecture in Australia.]

[Robin Boyd's book  
The book, ~~in its sweep,~~ <sup>was</sup> concerned with the total cultural environment to a remarkable degree: the natural and built environment were not yet issues of common concern but they were already Boyd's special concern. ~~With an~~ <sup>He was also</sup> ~~impressionist paragraph or two and a loose date~~ Boyd probably was also the <sup>one of the</sup> first historians to chronicle the arrival ~~in Australia~~ of the push-along lawn mower, running hot water, the refrigerator and many of those labour-saving devices which, <sup>together,</sup> ~~in aggregate,~~ form one of the main themes in our history. Though he did not call himself a historian, he was alert to those slower changes which ~~yet~~ were not easily charted: for instance, the way in which houses in the 1920s began to expose themselves to the sun, which they had previously shunned. He had a painter's eye for colours and observed the invasion of red in the 1880s or the cosy marriage of cream and green between about 1935 and 1950. In his handling of any theoretical issue - whether in engineering or aesthetics - he was never pompous and abstract, and was almost invariably dexterous. He would pick up a theory as if it were a knife and fork, and quickly eat with it instead of exalting it into an ornamental box of Sheffield Cutlery that was to be opened and used only when the guests had to be impressed.

Perhaps more than anything it is the artist in Robin Boyd which suffuses this book and makes it live. His father, Penleigh Boyd, was the painter, and <sup>his uncle</sup> Martin Boyd was the novelist, and the touch of painter and novelist permeates Australia's Home. Robin Boyd wrote and drew imaginatively. His prose was lucid, light and versatile: read the book's opening sentence, and see how it

conveys just about the right shade of formality and informality, precision and vagueness and warmth and aloofness, while it quickly ~~and elegantly~~ says all that needs to be said to send his story scudding along.

He could chisel out a sentence so that it had a precise meaning, or he could weave a sentence that had meanings and meanings. Thus he wrote of that brilliant architect who flourished in Melbourne in the first third of this century: "Desbrowe Annear was without taste; he was innocent of it. In his inventive years he had no need of it." Boyd could also write a sentence which had the sharpness of his own line drawings and, at the same time, the vague tint or <sup>mood</sup> ~~tint~~ of an era. The middling suburban houses of the 1880s he thus caught in this vivid portrait: "The galvanized-iron roofs on their front verandahs dipped in a sudden curve like the brim of a sundowner's hat and were draped at the edge with cast-iron, like corks on the brim to frighten away the flies."

Robin Boyd wrote some eight other books, including The Australian Ugliness and The Puzzle of Architecture. He also made his name as a practising architect, as the designer of the Australian displays at the World Expositions at Montreal in 1967 and Osaka in 1970, as a <sup>influential</sup> member of ~~influential~~ federal and state committees and boards, and as a critic and commentator through newspapers, radio and television. Whatever he did had the mark of originality and flair. He died, suddenly, in Melbourne on 1972.

Geoffrey Blainey

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