

Australian Dictionary of Biography

General Editor: Dr John Ritchie
Deputy General Editor: Dr Chris Cunneen

Research School of Social Sciences
The Australian National University
GPO Box 4 Canberra ACT 2601
Telephone (06) 249 2676 Fax (06) 257 1893

8 July 1991

Mrs Patricia Boyd Davies
290 Walsh Street
SOUTH YARRA VIC. 3141

Dear Mrs Boyd Davies,

Thank you for your letter of 27 June 1991, which I only received this morning on my return to the A.D.B. from a short holiday.

Your late husband, Robin Boyd, is indeed the subject of a forthcoming entry in Volume 13 of the A.D.B. I have telephoned Dr Geoffrey Serle in Melbourne and discussed your letter with him. I believe that Dr Serle is in possession of a draft of the entry on Robin Boyd and he has told me that he will see you and most willingly allow you to read and comment on the draft.

Many years ago, while I was studying at the University of Melbourne in the early 1960s I met Mandy Boyd and, later, again met her and Simon in Sydney. When next you are in contact with her would you please be so kind as to convey my best wishes?

With abiding affection,

Yours sincerely,



John Ritchie

1.

BOYD, ROBIN GERARD PENLEIGH (1919-1971), architect and critic, was born on January 3 1919 at Armadale, Melbourne, younger son of the celebrated painter, Penleigh Boyd, 29 and his wife, Edith Susan (nee Anderson), 39. The couple had had a daughter Pamela who died in infancy. Their older son John a'Beckett ("Pat", 1915-1981) was to become a distinguished wartime and civilian pilot.

Robin Boyd's first home in Kangaroo Ground Road, Warrandyte was a Picturesque house designed by his father in 1913 and built by his parents on their return to Australia following a wedding in Paris the previous year. It was called Robins.

At the age of three, having lived in Sydney for some months he made what was to be the first of his many journeys overseas when his father was commissioned to bring an exhibition of modern european art to Australia.

In 1923, within days of returning to Australia, his father was killed in a motor accident. His mother sold Robins and moved to one of the city's earliest apartment blocks; a flat-roofed building in Grange Road, Toorak.

In 1927 she bought a house at 40 Grant Street, East Malvern and it was from that solid brick bungalow that Robin Boyd was to walk to the East Malvern State School and later (1930-35) to Malvern Grammar.

Later still he was to catch the No 5 tram from the nearby corner to work, to the Melbourne Techncl College (later RMIT) and to the University Atlelier.

He was to leave Grant Street finally in 1941 for army service (walking across to the induction centre at Caulfield Racecourse with his bayonet fixed to his rifle) and to be married later that year.

He studied at night, working during the day in the office of A & K Henderson, then one of the nation's largest firms. His mother through Savage Club connections had obtained a three-year articleship with Kingsley Henderson.(qv)

The work in the Bank Place office was inimical to his growing Modernist ideas but he threw himself into the formation of the Victorian Architectural Students' Society.

With his three-generation background in aesthetic affairs and striking appearance; fair hair, clear blue eyes and light colouring, he was at 19 a charismatic leader in VASS affairs.

He founded its monthly newsfold Smudges, which soon became the voice of the reawakening profession. He wrote every editorial and in each issue singled out buildings for either a Blot or a Bouquet.

When he designated an apartment building in South Yarra a Blot its architects (Plaisted & Warner) threatened action. To avoid heavy damages Boyd published a retraction, but using his interest in typography, still managed to convey his opinion of the building.

When his articles were completed he worked in several offices but ultimately obtained a position as (sole) assistant to his hero, Roy Grounds. Earlier he had quit the University Atelier over a design decision of the director, Leighton Irwin (qv).

In 1941 both he and Grounds began war service.

On 27 December 1941 at Scots Church he married Dorothea Patricia Madder, the younger daughter of a successful businessman Ralph D Madder. The couple had known each other from childhood; Mrs Madder's sister being Mrs Merric Boyd, mother of his favourite cousin Arthur. His first building had been a studio for Arthur in Murrumbeena in 1939.

Despite the wartime housing shortage, the young couple managed to lease a flat in Grounds's noted Clendon (the subject of a Bouquet on its completion in 1939.

Boyd's army service was, along with many friends and colleagues, in the Survey Corps; first in the 3rd Aust. Field Svy. Reg and later the Cartographic Section. He served in Brisbane, Gympie and Port Moresby. Towards the end of the war he was repatriated to Bendigo and discharged in September 1945 with the rank of Warrant Officer Class 2.

During his army service which he regarded at best as a waste of time, he maintained his involvement with architecture. The preparation of military maps meant that drafting facilities were always available and with colleagues, notably Kevin Pethebridge and Francis Bell (Kingsley Henderson's nephew), he entered competitions and prepared designs for houses.

3

He also contributed to army publications and constantly debated the future form of the Australian house.

His first partnership, Associated Architects (with the sub-title Boyd Pethebridge & Bell) produced many unrealised designs, a significant house in Kew and a factory in Hawthorn (both since altered).

Boyd left the partnership when he was appointed director of the Small Homes Service which the RVIA set up in conjunction with the Age.

As director Boyd's career began its inexorable rise. The aim of the Service was to promote rational house design and to this task he was to bring his unique talents.

He prepared illustrations for publication of every design submitted by members. He designed standard specifications and rationalised working drawings so that they were acceptable to owner-builders, but most important; he was required to produce a weekly article on all aspects of design which affected the house.

The Service opened in July 1947 and within a short time Robin Boyd had become a household name.

For this job he was paid the high salary of twenty pounds a week and two pounds for the article.

Thus the young couple with their first child (who was eighteen months old before her father saw her) was able to begin the life of prosperous professionals. Their Clendon flat was furnished in an advanced style and became the centre of a busy social life.

The purchase of a car in 1946 and a block of land in Camberwell later that year had laid the foundations of a comfortable life in the emerging post-war world.

In 1947 the Boyds moved into their new house which, to comply with continuing wartime restrictions was only 110 m/2 (158 Riversdale Road, subsequently renumbered 666 was registered by the Historic Buildings Council in 1991).

In the same year he passed the Registration examination, joined the RVIA and won the Robert and Ada Haddon Travelling Scholarship.

4

The next seven years, interrupted in 1951 by travel in Europe, were devoted to running the Service, writing and lecturing. As a lecturer he was impressive, preparing his material carefully and delivering it in his clear, incisive voice.

Most of the commissions in his growing practice were for houses and from this period came some of his most creative work. He prepared all drawings himself, working in his distinctive left-handed style. He later described these years as "brief-case practice." It was productive and lucrative but limited in scale.

In 1953 he was approached along with Roy Grounds, by Frederick Romberg to form a partnership. Their office opened in January 1954 in a terrace house in Albert Street, East Melbourne and flourished from its inception.

The long-awaited post-war boom had arrived. The commissions ranged from flats to factories, schools and churches. Unusual for a major office, houses continued to form a significant part of the practice.

Although each of the three partners was individually famous the firm maintained design anonymity. Some buildings were recognizable but generally the firm developed a corporate style combining features of all three partners and representing the advanced thinking of the era.

Their work was a recognizably Australian form of the International Style, then called Contemporary.

Because of Boyd's fascination with the flexibility offered by frame construction many of his earlier houses (Gillison, Darbyshire, Myer) have been either extensively altered or destroyed.

Of his later, more substantial work, probably the Featherston-Currey House, Ivanhoe, the Baker House, Bacchus Marsh and the two houses he built for himself, best illustrate his wide range of styles.

Of his non-residential work, Domain Park apartments, Menzies College, Latrobe University and the Tower Hill Museum show his willingness to embrace unconventional plan-forms and construction methods.

Unique among successful practitioners, Boyd continued to write during these busy years and take an active role in public and professional affairs.

He published Victorian Modern (1946) and Australia's Home (1952). The latter was extraordinarily successful and became a textbook. The work by which he would be best known, The Australian Ugliness appeared in 1960.

In December 1959 Roy Grounds was offered and accepted the commission to design the Victorian Cultural (now Arts) Centre. He offered to share the decade's most important architectural project with Boyd.

Boyd refused, choosing to remain in the partnership which continued in name until 1962 when Romberg and Boyd was founded.

The new firm produced notable work in the straitened early 60s. In 1965 Frederick Romberg accepted the chair of architecture at the University of Newcastle but remained in the partnership.

During this decade Boyd, already a national figure, established himself on the world architectural scene. He travelled frequently, not only to Europe and the US but to SE Asia and Japan.

He published Kenzo Tange; a Biography and The Walls Around Us in 1962 and in 1965, The New Architecture and probably his most important but relatively unappreciated work, The Puzzle of Architecture.

In each of the four following years he produced The Book of Melbourne and Canberra, New Directions in Japanese Architecture, Artificial Australia and (with others) Living in Australia.

In 1969, while he was president-elect, he revamped the Chapter journal Architect and made it a critical force. He also instigated the Melbourne Papers (a series of lectures by visitors which would ultimately be published

He supervised every detail of any publications in which he was involved, choosing every typeface and often producing the illustrations. His every decision was influenced by his developed contemporary taste.

A paradox was his enthusiasm for large american cars.

In ¹⁹⁵⁹1960 he moved into a spectacular house in South Yarra he had designed for himself and his young family, two daughters and a son.

He became a trustee of the NGV (and thus Roy Ground's client), State President and Gold Medallist, RAIA and an Hon. Fellow, AIA.

He designed the Australian Expo exhibits at Montreal (1965) and Osaka (1970) even writing the scripts of the broadcast commentaries.

In 1971 he was awarded the CBE, the first awarded an architect, it was said at the time, on purely architectural merit. Later in what was to be the last year of his life year he was appointed a judge of the international competition for extensions to the British Houses of Parliament.

That honour summed up an important aspect of Boyd's career.

From many positions of authority over the years, he had recommended other architects for awards and commissions; many of which should have rightly gone to him.

Late in 1971 on his return to Australia his health deteriorated and he entered St Andrews Hospital across from his office. He continued to work in hospital.

Soon after being discharged he suffered another setback and was placed in the Royal Melbourne Hospital for observation.

On 12 September he wrote a long letter to the editor of Architect commenting on the layout of the current issue, listing misspellings and making constructive suggestions.

He died early on Saturday 14 September 1971 from causes never satisfactorily explained.

Baptized an Anglican, Boyd was a professed agnostic. His office arranged a private funeral service in Ormond College chapel.

The RAIA arranged a public tribute to its popular Chapter President in the garden of its headquarters Robert Russell House (Boyd had suggested the name) on April 16 during which excerpts of his writings were read.

He was at the time of his death the most widely known Australian architect and critic. His estate comprised, apart from his practice, his house which carried a mortgage, an overdraft and a life assurance policy.

His death shocked the profession and the community at large and obituaries appeared in all Australian papers and in The Times (by J M Richards) and Architectural Forum (by Peter Blake).

Robin Boyd is remembered both by his writings and his buildings.

Many of his books remain in print and his buildings especially his houses are the subject of increasing interest and continuing study.

In 1989 RMIT held a symposium on his work.

His Great Great Australian Dream was published posthumously. It summed up the pretensions of his profession and the frustrations of his generation.

He had become an international authority on architecture but his abiding interest was the design of buildings.

Although he was a member of the international architectural establishment and the only Australian to be ever so honoured, he never lost an engaging modesty.

That quality and an all-pervasive sense of humour probably distinguished him even more than his capacity for work and his pursuit of excellence.

AUSTRALIAN DICTIONARY

OF BIOGRAPHY

If not claimed within seven days, please return to:

The Australian National University

GPO Box 4 Canberra ACT 2601.

Dr. John Ritchie



Mrs Patricia Boyd Davies

290 Walsh Street

SOUTH YARRA VIC 3141