Age of Small Homes

The Housing Service of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (Victorian Chapter) continues to advise intending homebuyers and provides, for a nominal fee, working drawings and specifications of a wide range of architect-designed houses.

In its heyday (1947-1970) and under its original name, The Small Homes Service, influenced a generation of housing design. It shaped some suburbs and changed building habits. NEIL CLEBERHAN, the service's second director (1954-1961), writes of the early days.

T2129. This plan groups its plumbing, packs in much storage space, "breaks" the line, in fact has everything normally required that is, everything except a hipped roof. Area, 10 squares, £2,880.

The idea of a homebuilders' advisory service seemed to have taken root during the Second World War years. As peace approached the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects (then and for many years an independent State body in a Federal family) did not generate the public interest in housing the homecoming soldiers but it was quick to take it up.

A similar wave had swept across the country in 1918 and many of the profession's leaders in that second post-war era, had established themselves in practice in the years following World War I.

Advertisements, covers of the Women's Weekly and Federal loan publicity featured short haired diggers looking to the future, significantly ignoring the page-boyed partner beside them. Their gaze was fixed on a Future Home.

That home was inevitably single-storeyed, detached and, depending upon the sophistication of the advertising agency, hipped, gabled or flat-roofed. It stood on a bare block and usually had a corner window.
The Small Homes Service of the RVIA in conjunction with The Age had not been set up by the time peace was declared but it finally got underway in 1947 and its houses were what is name suggested - small. In his history of the service which has been written for the forthcoming sesqui-centenary Year Book, Geoffrey Mewton traces the genesis of the service in those early years. My view is more personal and completely myopic.

The nexus which made the service such a success, apart from the miraculous choice of its first director, was the fact that The Age was embarking upon a rebuilding program and its architects were the new firm of Godfrey, Spowers, Hughes, Mewton & Lobb. The long established firm of Godfrey and Spowers had designed the Collins Street office for The Age and later, the adjacent Age Chambers, to match, in 1930. Thus two important RVIA connections, Race W. Godfrey and Geoffrey H. Mewton, were able to persuade their client to back the proposed service with not only a weekly press exposure but also money. Without these two solid (but unplanned) advantages, the Small Homes Service would probably have had the short life of its interstate mates in Adelaide, Sydney and Brisbane.

Early in 1947, the RVIA committee advertised for a director and interviewed three applicants. (Even the term director was precocious in those days when directors sat on boards.) The three applicants were Eric Lyon, Lloyd Orton and Robin Boyd. Boyd was selected and left his position in the office of the Myer Store architect (Donald C. Ward); a position he had held since his discharge from the army in 1946. Throughout the autumn and early winter of 1947 Boyd set up the service. He composed three specifications (brick, veneer, and timber), did the layouts for each page, and made use of type-blocks from The Age which he had discovered. Some of the wooden faces had not been used in living memory.

RVIA members had been invited to contribute designs to the service; a floor plan and an elevation with working drawings to follow. Boyd prepared the floor plans and perspectives for these designs on foot-square cartridge paper. The plans were annotated with Age-set room names replete with the buzz words of the decade - terrace, pergola, informal, formal, utility and carport. These squares were covered with cellophane and were the primary display. They carried their code number, floor area (this was still the time of the wartime size-control; 12.5 squares maximum, later 14) and the minimum site frontage required.
The office opened for business on the ground floor of the State Electricity Commission building on Monday 7th July 1947. The week previous to the opening had been taken up with the normal preparations of opening an office. An additional chore for the director was the design of the actual office cubicle resting in the surprised S.E.C. showroom in Flinders Street.

The Service's office itself was a light timber box with a typical Boyd color scheme - white (a relatively new color) and purple. The public and private areas were divided by a screen which formed a daring diagonal on plan. Vertical timber louvres, finger holes on cupboard doors and coir matting fascinated students. A Caneite partition shielded a narrow drafting bench where students laboured (at two shillings an hour) to prepare amendments to the standard plans.

In that week of July 1947, Boyd had handled two other extra-curricular activities. He completed his entry for the Haddon Scholarship. (It was an art gallery in Mildura and it won) and he moved from Clendon Flats into the house he had designed and built in Riversdale Road, Camberwell. (That house is probably worth a passing mention.)

The land was bought sight unseen. The agent said it bordered a creek and nobody could see how it could be built on. The block just east of the Alamein railway was later to become part of a wild freeway proposal. Boyd made one of his rare uses of powerful friends to re-direct it. The house's west configuration was the then-permitted set back requirement. The east was the line formed by stable ground. In between those two linear constraints he built one of the most important houses of the late 1940's. It took him twelve months.
Thirty four years ago that virtuoso performance amazed me, a 4th year student. Boyd regarded it as normal output. I was to refer back to it constantly. His ability to carry out many tasks at once, each given a carefully controlled degree of involvement, is probably my strongest memory of him. He directed the Service for seven years, with the exception of 1951, when he used the Haddon prize to travel in Europe. He set an indelible stamp on the Service. It was to have six directors subsequently (all except one man were left handed.)

The Age involvement with the Service ceased in 1980 but, by that time, its influence was to be seen everywhere. During one period it accounted for nearly one in ten houses built in the State. In suburbs such as Beaumaris, entire areas bore the familiar elements of Service designs; low roofs; generous window areas (usually north-facing); retention of existing trees. It encouraged the use of new materials (Stramit, Stegbar windowwalls; plain color laminates); new planning configurations; carports; galley kitchens; and outdoor living areas. It openly campaigned for carports (successfully) and against "brick areas" (unsuccessfully). It shaped many new born suburbs (usually in the outer south-east) and a generation's attitude to house and product designs. Its history is yet to be written but some of us, involved in various degrees in those early years, are taking the first steps to set the story down.

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