Review - Our Glorious Homes

Robin Boyd was the first architectural critic to give some order to Australia's domestic diversity. He proposed about a dozen "Major Steps of Style" to categorise the evolution of Australia's home. Two recent publications, one from Adelaide and another from Melbourne, attempt to do the same.

*House Styles in Adelaide* is written by J N Persse, D M Rose and others for the Australian Institute of Valuers (Incorporated), and ambitiously covers the period from 1836 to 1980. Thirty-three styles are nominated and some of these are sub-divided further.

This is my major criticism of the book. Instead of organising and simplifying the diversity of styles there is only more confusion. Secondly there is confusion between names which are derived from building forms and names which reflect architectural details. One style is called "Single Fronted Two Storey Cottage" while another is "Spanish Mission". The most amorphous name is "Gentleman's Residence".

Clearly the authors have approached their task with real estate agents' eyes. Their stated intention is to help the public become more aware of "the significance of identifiable styles in Adelaide houses". They say that the names which others have given to house styles are often ambiguous, incorrect or even pretentious. It seems to me that they continue the tradition of euphemisms. My favourite of theirs is "Waterfall Austerity".

The book is a lot of fun as a collection of photographs and there are plenty of them. Some of the examples chosen are classics of their type, such as the full colour Spanish Mission house on page 65. Other photographs show only marginal differences between buildings.

My favourite house appears on page 76. The authors don't give its style a name but how could they? It has a butterfly roof, a full bow front and a side entry complete with vinyl covered chairs, and a concrete pot. It is built with two types of pressed cement blocks. The open ones are used as ventilators. Careful inspection is rewarded by many more delightful details.
The second publication is a booklet prepared by David Harvey and Celia Waters for the City of Essendon as a guide for people who are considering renovations. Essendon is a northern suburb of which reflects the full history of Melbourne. So the booklet is more limited in period and area than the first, but achieves no less because of this.

With twenty-five little sketches on one page at the beginning they have summed up all our domestic diversity. An organised breakdown of each of the six major styles follows with, on one page two sketches of typical houses in the style and on the opposite a range of dates, a succinct introduction and the points to look for. Sympathetic alterations and extensions are suggested, again in sketch form. Appropriate gardens and fences are also noted.

At each stage the sketches and diagrams suggest as much information as the reader needs without the confusion found in the Adelaide photos. This booklet would only need to be extended slightly to provide a very handy little guide. My dear friend Gloria Soames, while thrilling at the former must recommend the latter.

J N Persse, D M Rose (et al) and House Styles in Adelaide, Australian Institute of Valuers (Inc).

David Harvey and Celia Waters - A Guide to Altering Old Houses, City of Essendon.