Editorial
(Un)loved Modern 2

Scott Robertson, Guest Editor
This is the second issue of Historic Environment devoted to the papers delivered at the 2009 Australia ICOMOS (Un)loved Modern Sydney conference. The themes of the papers in this issue deal with the problems of conserving, adapting, and updating housing.

Theodore Prudon gives an historical background to the development of public housing in the US commencing in the interwar period, the legislative underpinnings of that housing and the eventual withdrawal of government from the provision of public housing. Prudon’s case studies of public housing estates and buildings examine the Modernist manifesto of the influence of the built environment on improving, not only the standard of living, but the behaviour of those living in those buildings. He examines the fate of Alison and Peter Smithson’s Robin Hood Gardens in London where the Modernist argument was turned against the preservation of the building by the UK government in stating that the neglect and vandalism of Robin Hood Gardens was symptomatic of how the building had failed to provide a quality environment for its inhabitants.

Rebecca Hawcroft examines the work of émigré architects working in Sydney in the two decades following World War 2. Architects, Hugh Buhrich, Henry Epstein, and Hans Peter Oser had arrived in Australia prior to the war, fleeing the Nazi anti-Jewish persecutions in Germany and Austria. Hawcroft discusses how the three established their practices initially within an émigré community, how their efforts to practice were sometimes thwarted by the architectural establishment and how their works are emerging from obscurity through current investigations and re-evaluations of the “(un)known” architects who, for various reasons, had not been included in past histories of the development of Modernism in Australia.

David Jones’ paper on Moral Rights under the Copyright Act exposes a larger question with respect to Modern architecture. In discussion with Peter Muller, Jones reveals the argument that heritage and Modernism are not comfortable bedfellows. Muller contends that, once the original client moves on and, therefore, the circumstances that informed the brief for the building have changed, the preservation of the building is not justified. This reflects the Modernist ethos of designing to satisfy a brief with a building closely following the programmatic function. Neither this ideology nor the Moral Rights legislation examine the rights of the community to preserve what is important to it and what has influenced that community’s existence and development. In other words, how much does a designer “own” the designed building and how much does the community “own” it and have the right to preserve it into the future, even against the wishes of the original designer?

Hannah Lewi presents the results of her research into the preservation of Modern iconic houses as house museums. She examines the status of Modern heritage houses as ‘historical documents’ and the role they play in the ongoing formation of architectural histories of Modernism and
her research investigates how conservation, interpretation and display strategies have been modified to the particular circumstances of Modern houses, in contrast to older and more ‘traditional’ heritage properties. Curators try to balance the architectural and design integrity of the building with the need to engage the public through a “humanisation” of the building and the telling of stories.

Peter Lovell examines the problem of preserving the significance and design intent the modest, single family Modern house when faced with the pressures of upgrading the house to modern standards of services, finishes and space. The very elements of Modern design are those that militate against listing under conventional heritage criteria (such as context within the street where Modern houses often were designed to turn their back to the street to create private, sunny living areas facing North or the rear of the site). Lovell presents a case study where his practice transformed two of Robin Boyd’s Farfor Flats from holiday units to full-time residences; retaining the “essence” of Boyd’s design where the “substance” could not be preserved.

The preservation of buildings often requires compromise and alteration to meet present-day standards and requirements. Modern buildings present a greater challenge, not just because of their tight programmatic functionalism, or transitory materiality but because they are still considered to be recent and, therefore not heritage, and not loved.