Heritage and the modern house

Peter Lovell
Abstract

This paper explores the tension that can arise between current ways of living and expectations of the domestic environment and the physical limitations of the modestly scaled modernist houses of the early post-war period. This is examined through a series of case studies which explore the general sub-theme of the single house under threat in the context of heritage planning legislation, the original architect’s design intent and current owners’ requirements.

Introduction

Urban conservation practice in Australia has now moved well into the twentieth century in the awareness and recognition of the more recent past. Numerous places of the post-World War 2 period are individually recognised for reasons of cultural heritage significance, as increasingly are areas and precincts which reflect the extraordinary investment in post-war development and growth. And yet if one compared the numbers of Victorian or Federation buildings with post-war buildings which were protected by individual or area heritage controls the figures would be vastly different. This disparity reflects many factors; popular disenchantment with Modernism, the utilitarian nature of post-war housing, notions of disposability, on occasions the poor quality and hazardous nature of materials, the predominance of the popular view of heritage as picturesque, and ‘old’ and the abiding sense that the post-war period is still the recent past and that insufficient time has elapsed to permit dispassionate assessment.

In many respects the basic challenge of raising awareness of such places is similar to that faced in the 1960s with our nineteenth century heritage. The difference, however, is that 50 years on, the community is far more aware of cultural heritage and has an increasingly informed view. The Modern house or housing estate of the post-war period is not a place which fits easily within what contemporary communities necessarily view as heritage. They are still places which rely on knowledge and visual appreciation of a built form, and for many are an acquired taste. Their identification is one which is still likely to rely on the traditional assessment of architectural values and analysis of stylistic purity rather than on strong historical or social values. The questions to be asked are; is it architect designed, who was the architect, where does it sit in their oeuvre, was it recognised in awards? well ahead of questions of history, ownership and place in patterns of development.

The modern house in a heritage planning context

Some of the challenges faced in addressing the Modern house in a heritage planning context are evidenced in a recent planning application which was appealed to the Victorian Civil and
Administrative Tribunal (VCAT). The case involved the demolition of the Bardas house, by Melbourne architect Guilford Bell. Designed and built in 1958, the house was one of a group of Melbourne architect-designed houses of the 1950s which turned their backs on their street, focusing habitable spaces onto internal garden areas (figures 12 & 2). The Bardas house was not the first of these and followed examples by others, including Roy Grounds (figure 3), Yuncken & Freeman and Robin Boyd. It does appear to be the first of such houses where Bell himself pursued this approach, but considered in the context of his work overall and the work of his contemporaries, does not stand out as a place of individual significance.

The matter before the VCAT was the demolition of the existing building, which was ungraded, but located in a heritage overlay precinct under the provisions of the Melbourne Planning Scheme. While acknowledging that the house was considered to be ‘an interesting example of what progressive architects were producing in those years’ the Tribunal decision was to permit demolition, assessing amongst other matters that the building was not an important work of the architect and was not a forerunner of the later work for which Bell is generally celebrated (VCAT 2008). A further factor in the decision was that the house made no explicit contribution to the streetscape in which it was located or to the precinct as a whole.

The issues raised in this case are those which arise for many Modern houses where the public realm presence can be unprepossessing, the architecture is internalised and concealed, and a conventional response to context is lacking. They are issues which it can be anticipated will be debated at length in the future as more buildings of this ilk are recognised for heritage reasons and which the Lovell Chen office has had to address in two recent projects.

The Yarra Boulevard precinct

In 2008, Lovell Chen was commissioned by the City of Boroondara to review proposed heritage precincts in the suburbs of Kew and Camberwell. The precincts had been identified in 2005-
06 during an earlier project which involved the review of individual building gradings. The 2008 review examined 14 areas, nine of which were recommended for protection by way of heritage overlay controls under the Boroondara Planning Scheme. Of the nine, one, the Yarra Boulevard precinct in Kew, was identified on the basis of the high concentration of post-World War 2 architect-designed housing. The assessment of buildings within the precinct in relation to individual and precinct values raised a number of issues, particularly as related to comparative analysis and the impact of alterations and additions. This second issue also gave rise to consideration of the management of such places in a planning context where the focus of most heritage planning controls is on streetscape and public realm presence.

The Yarra Boulevard precinct in Kew is one of the most architecturally diverse in the City of Boroondara. While containing a scattering of houses of the late Victorian and Federation periods, the dominant phases of development are those of the interwar and post-war periods. In each phase there is strong representation of the work of prominent architects with, on occasions, quite dramatic contrasts in built form and style.

Located on land sloping steeply down to the Yarra River, the earliest sales in the area occurred in the 1840s when a number of large estates were established. These were progressively subdivided and re-subdivided in the later nineteenth century but much of the land remained undeveloped. With difficult access and lack of transportation links it was not until the 1930s that development began in earnest, largely as a consequence of the construction of the Yarra Boulevard (1931-33) on the western edge of the precinct. This resulted in two new subdivisions; the 30 lot Boulevard Estate in 1940 and the New Boulevard Estate a few years later. The interruption of World War 2 and prohibition on civilian building meant that development was again delayed and it was in post-war years that activity re-commenced.

While construction during the interwar periods of development had focused on the more accessible lots, it was in the post-war period that the more steeply sloping sites were addressed as ideally suited to Modernist forms. Located in a remnant bushland setting, the houses often perched on their lots. Steep driveways lead to undercroft parking beneath exposed structural framing on which asymmetrical cubic forms with large expanses of glass provided panoramic views to the city. Flat roofs, strong horizontal lines, shading devices, lightly framed balconies and unadorned use of brick, steel and concrete were typical features of many compositions.

In his exploration of the architecture of the area, Conrad Hamann identifies Enriched Modernism, Post-war and mainstream Modernism along with the 1960s continuation of these modernisms as the particular strengths (Hamann 2009:13). Containing a number of outstanding examples of each of these design phases, mostly linked with prominent architects and

Figure 4: Robin Boyd’s Wilson House, 25 Dunlop Avenue, Kew, 1955-56, appeared as a floating box over an open undercroft. (Source: State Library of Victoria, Peter Wille collection)

Figure 5: 2005 view of the house with altered glazing and infilled undercroft. Managed changes which can be reversed. (Photo: Kate Paterson, Lovell Chen)
owners, the area is one which stands out in a Melbourne context such that it is well worthy of recognition for heritage reasons.

Equally it is an area in which the difficulty in managing and responding to such places with regard to the heritage values is evidenced in works which have occurred over more recent times and in the absence of any heritage controls. These works are the result of the inevitable desire or need for owners to upgrade, to modernise, to expand accommodation and to improve the ability for the buildings to respond to a contemporary lifestyle. They are changes which, on occasions, reflect the sometimes modest nature of the building and the fact that the materials and structures are a product of the limitations placed on early post-war construction. The changes which have occurred range from minor and easily reversible, to major; such that the original form is fundamentally challenged.

In observing the changes (figures 4 & 5) it is evident that the guidelines which typically apply in such heritage areas require refinement if they are to manage heritage places where the three dimensional qualities of the place are critical to the maintenance of significance.

The existing local heritage policy which applies to the Heritage Overlay area in the Boroondara Planning Scheme sets out broad objectives in relation to conservation of places of significance and provides guidance for works, including alterations and additions. As with many such heritage guidelines in the planning context, these tread a fine line between the conservation of the heritage place, in which management of heritage is limited to visible fabric in a public realm context and the broader consideration of conservation of the place within a precinct. While now refined and evolved, the guidelines have developed from those framed 25 or more years ago for use in the context of typical inner suburban terrace housing and Victorian and Federation villas. As such, their focus remains on the public presentation of the place and they lack the explicit guidance which is required in addressing works to buildings in which the architectural planning and three dimensional qualities may be as important as the presence in and presentation to the street. For such buildings, the infilling of an undercroft or a courtyard, a second storey, new openings, a changed glazing pattern, or the removal of a shading device can all be actions that can alter the place so that those values which go to its significance are compromised or possibly destroyed.

If examples of the Modern house are to be meaningfully conserved within a local heritage planning context there needs to be a careful re-examination of the relationship between values and the management of material change. In particular there needs to be a review of the guidelines which are applied in considering works to such places. Guidelines need to prompt an analysis of the place such that the values which contribute to significance are identified and greater scope is provided for tailored solutions which respond to those values, albeit on occasions that they are values which are not immediately appreciated in a public context. In the Yarra Boulevard precinct, where one objective is to conserve the Modern house, conserving what is visible without consideration of the whole will lead to a poor outcome. In moving to the next stage of the process new guidelines need to be crafted which respond to the particular needs of these places and which will enable the management of material change in a way which remains relevant as the environment in which heritage exists continues to evolve (figures 6 & 7).

**Farfor Flats**

Over the same period of time that the Boroondara heritage review was taking place, Lovell Chen was also in the process of designing alterations and additions to two Robyn Boyd-designed units located on the Mornington Peninsula at Portsea (figures 8 to 15).

The Farfor Flats complex was constructed in 1968 for Mrs Imogen Farfor. Mrs Farfor commissioned prominent architect Robin Boyd of the firm Romberg and Boyd to design the flats, which were conceived as four separate holiday houses, each with its own courtyard/kitchen garden and three-car carport. The remainder of the site, including a garden and driveway, was designated on the original strata title as common property. This arrangement was facilitated by the introduction in 1967 of the *Strata Titles Act*. This Act introduced the concepts of
Imogen Farfor retained one of the units for herself, and the other three units were variously sold or passed to members of Mrs Farfor’s family.

The Farfor Flats complex was designed for a long narrow site extending north from Point Nepean Road to the cliff top over the foreshore at Portsea, on Victoria’s Mornington Peninsula. The four units were positioned in two pairs, each pair sharing a party wall. Units 1 and 2 fronted the cliff top overlooking the sea, while units 3 and 4 were located at the southern end of the site. A driveway extended from the road and along the eastern side of the site, curving around between Unit 3 and the two northernmost units, Units 1 and 2.

Boyd’s own description of the complex, as included in his 1970 publication, Living in Australia, was as follows:

This group of holiday houses at Portsea, Victoria, was built in 1968 on a long, comparatively narrow site running between the highway and a cliff above the bay beach. The four units are identical, but each has its own private, and in some way different, outlook from the long window-wall of its main rooms. Each of these window-walls opens to a terrace, over which the roof tilts up abruptly to give cover from the rain while allowing a deeper penetration of sun. Instead of a passage, a semi-outdoor garden space, roofed but only screened on one side, serves as a general hall. (Boyd and Strizic 1970:60)

The buildings are simple, generally flat-roofed, single-storey structures constructed of brick and timber. The external appearance was dominated by the terrace elevation, where a row of floor-to-ceiling glazed windows and sliding doors opened onto a terrace.

Above was the dramatic form of the verandah roof, tilted up at a 45 degree angle and supported by substantial timber props (figure 10). Other than for this very distinctive elevation, the buildings were simple and understated and finished in white painted brick and exposed Western Red Cedar joinery and linings.

The units are thought originally to have been identical in plan form and fabric (figure 9). Each contained a living room and master bedroom facing onto the terrace. A small galley-type kitchen was linked to the living room and looked over a small enclosed courtyard. The other rooms — bathroom, laundry and bedroom(s) — opened off one side of a passage, the other side of the passage providing access to the courtyard and carport.

The passage was a particular feature of the houses (figure 11), having been designed to be partially open to the elements, one side being enclosed only by insect screening (flywire). This blending of the inside and outside was also expressed though the creation of a pebbled garden (comprising pebbles, paving and some planting) within the passage itself. Notwithstanding the consistency of overall plan form, it would appear that the details of the design of each unit may
have undergone some minor variations during construction, presumably to suit the particular requirements of the future occupants. For example, the terrace to Unit 1 was paved with slate, while the other terraces had 18”x18” (450mm x 450mm) precast concrete pavers.2 There is also the suggestion that at Unit 2 glazing was substituted for the insect screen in the passage.

Like many of Boyd’s commissions, the complex has been described in a number of architectural publications, both in the period following its completion and subsequently. Cross-Section (May 1969) noted that the design of the complex and the siting of the individual houses produced ‘an interesting massing and privacy for each’. Cross-Section also remarked upon the holiday house quality of the design:

The planning and finishes of white painted brick and a great quantity of ‘natural’ Western Red Cedar establish an atmosphere of holiday informality, and the timbered ‘Guest House’, the wet and coolness of trellised ferneries, and evokes the pleasurable qualities of stick timber. (Cross Section 1969)

Farfor Flats was also one of a large number of Boyd buildings identified and illustrated in the special issue of Architect published in late 1971, following Boyd’s death. Reference has also been made to Farfor Flats in more recent surveys of Boyd’s career and work, including Philip Goad’s article on Boyd’s residential work of the period 1959-71, in the special Boyd issue of Transition, published in 1992 (Goad 1992).

All four units had undergone varying degrees of alteration with the greatest changes occurring in the two landward units where additions and alterations have been made at ground level.

The new works

Lovell Chen was approached by the new owners of Unit 1 to refurbish the unit as a permanent residence. Of all the units, Unit 1 was the more substantially intact and essentially retained its original plan form and much of Boyd’s original detailing. It was a building conceived of as a
holiday house, simple and lightweight in construction and relatively basic in its facilities. Living spaces were adequate but not generous and bedrooms modest to small. Externally, as with the development as a whole, the presentation was focused on privacy and, to a degree, concealment, with the principal external design feature concealed from public view.

The brief for Unit 1, and subsequently received for Unit 2, required a transformation of the houses to meet the expectations of both clients. The more substantial challenge was to deliver increased living space and overall accommodation. As a key principle it was considered that that any works to the units needed to be addressed within a ‘master plan’. While the brief for each unit was unique to the client, there was acceptance by both that the external form needed to present as a whole, maintaining Boyd’s concept. For both clients the additional accommodation was achieved with the construction of a second level. The design followed the principles conceived of by Boyd, maintaining the form and materiality of the original houses. An L-shaped plan form was utilised which enabled retention of the original internal courtyard space which was a key aspect of the original pebbled arrival gallery. While the mass of the addition sits forward of the Boyd location for an addition, it maintains a sufficient setback to allow the steeply sloping sun scoop to remain the dominant feature of the elevation.

At ground level the initial response was to maintain the entry gallery space in Unit 1 and interpret the same space in Unit 2 where it had been largely reconfigured. Over time however, it became clear that delivering Boyd’s concept of an outdoor space within the house would not meet the client’s expectations and progressively this space was also modified with replacement of the flywire screen with glazing and replacement of the pebble and paving floor (figure 12). Internally the changes revolve around the maintenance of the arrival sequence but with the relocation of bedroom spaces to the new upper floor and expansion of the living spaces in the area which previously accommodated both living and bedroom spaces.

The approach to the design of the second level addition was informed by a drawing prepared by Boyd’s office in July 1968 for an addition to Unit 2. This placed a second level to the rear of the unit over the entry and carport area. The design incorporated the same steeply pitched light-scoop verandah roof as located on the lower seaward elevation.

The Farfor Flats raised many of the issues which confront architects and designers in managing the Modern house in the twenty-first century. Of often lightweight construction and clad in
materials which have a limited life span, they are not buildings which are readily adapted without a relatively significant level of intervention. While some are of such significance so as to warrant preservation, many are simply good examples of their type. The ability to retain such places depends upon accepting a degree of change, but ideally pursued with an understanding of the fundamentals which make such places significant.

As noted by architectural historian Alan Powers, the challenge for the practitioner in preserving the Modern house is one of essence and substance (Powers 2001). These are places where the qualitative values of program and style may well surpass the quantitative values of material and fabric. While the conservation of any place is inextricably about both, the emphasis of one over another may result in a quite distorted outcome. Form, function and fabric need to be fully understood as the basis upon which intervention occurs and is managed so that the values which go to significance are maintained.

**Conclusion**

The 2008 survey and review of the Yarra Boulevard precinct in Boroondara confirms the wealth of post-war architect designed houses which survive in such areas, and their fragility and vulnerability. While statutory heritage protection by way of heritage controls may be implemented in this particular area there are others where it will not. Identifying and recognising the importance of these buildings must be a priority in the process of ongoing heritage surveys and assessments if we are to retain those examples which are important as opposed to those which simply survived. Along with the process must be an ongoing process of education about and promotion of these places such that current and future generations recognize their value. There must also be the development of appropriate management tools to ensure that the process of conservation is relevant and realistic, including the precise identification of values which support significance.

Writing in *Modern Houses Melbourne*, 30 years ago, architect and commentator Norman Day commented in relation to guidelines then in preparation by the National Trust, ‘When these guides are adopted universally the character of streets from our past can be recreated while allowing for the necessary renovation and improvement demanded by the contemporary owner’
His comments were made in relation to very sensitive additions by architect John Kenny to a Victorian terrace house located in St Vincent Place, Melbourne. In looking at our ‘unloved Modern’, it is evident that we need new guidelines which address the particular issues which arise in conservation of these buildings and which continue to balance the desire and need to conserve with the demands and expectations of the contemporary owner.

References


Cross-Section, 1969, Melbourne: University of Melbourne, Department of Architecture, May 1969, p. 3


Endnotes

1 Previously, arrangements of this kind - involving several houses or units on one site but in separate ownership - were possible, but could not be organised on the basis of a straightforward subdivision *per se*. Rather, such arrangements could be achieved through a company share system or through variations introduced in the late 1950s and 1960s to the provisions of the Local Government Act and/or the Transfer of Land Act. Survey Practice Handbook, 1994.

2 Information from Farfor Flats job file, Grounds Romberg & Boyd archive, State Library of Victoria.