Unloved, over-loved or just mis-understood? Modern architecture: the problem child of heritage

Philip Goad
Abstract

Putting the terms modern architecture and heritage together would seem to suggest an oxymoron. But everyday practice, sound scholarship and commonsense tell us otherwise. There is, of course, absolutely no reason why a recently constructed building or place considered historically significant across a range of criteria might not be considered heritage and worthy of preservation. But the fact of the matter is that twentieth century architecture, especially much of what was produced after World War 2, engenders its own very special oxymoron – a love-hate relationship that bedevils its very existence, or at the very least often complicates easy judgment, sensible management and faithful retention. Over the past decade, there have been many and various success stories in terms of modernism and heritage, but an equal number of less favourable outcomes. This paper examines the ambivalence that can be directed towards modern architecture and the internal ambivalence that lies within modern architecture and which works against the idea of heritage. This will be done by highlighting, mainly through Australian example, four syndromes: the difficult typology; the difficult idiom; the difficult comparison; and the difficult house. Where appropriate, some glimmer of therapy will be identified, a course of treatment that requires of both public and professional a level of re-education and self-reflection.

It is now fourteen years since the symposium Fibro house: Opera House: conserving mid-twentieth century heritage was convened by Sheridan Burke in 1999 at the Museum of Sydney (Burke 2000). The event was significant in that it highlighted an acute awareness amongst Australian heritage practitioners and heritage agencies of the day, especially in New South Wales, that a process of education was required, for not just the public and institutions, but also for architecture, planning and heritage-related professions on the importance of being able to understand, document, assess and manage post-war heritage sites. For this author, the event was extremely useful because it enabled reflection on the way that certain forms of modern architecture in Australia were considered orthodox, as being somehow sanctioned or approved, and others were not (Goad 2000:27-43).1 There were forms of architectural production that were still being overlooked in what was at the time a most welcome and generally widespread appreciation of post-war heritage. But have things changed since?

Over the last twenty years in Australia, one can argue that there has been a growing acceptance of the heritage value of 20th century architecture, and especially pleasing has been the celebration of some of Australia’s iconic works of monumental post-war modern architecture. Australia’s best known building, the Sydney Opera House (1957-73) gained World Heritage listing from UNESCO and two of Melbourne’s modernist landmarks, the Olympic Swimming Stadium (1952-56) and the Sidney Myer Music Bowl (1956-59) (figure 1) have been registered
by Heritage Victoria as being of state significance. These were obvious candidates for such recognition—well-known public buildings with a great deal of public sentiment attached to their construction and subsequent history, and in themselves, landmarks within their own architecture cultures of the day. But the Sydney Opera House campaign took nearly a decade and a huge national effort to earn its UNESCO listing and thankfully, the building retains its function and its distinctive conceptual allure. The Sidney Myer Music Bowl survived plans for radical addition and was given, after detailed consultation with its original architects, a sympathetic restoration, refurbishment and additions by Gregory Burgess in association with Lovell Chen. It too retains its original use as a concert venue and is much loved by its Melbourne public. But the Olympic Swimming Stadium, having survived one radical makeover by one of its original designers (Kevin Borland) in the 1980s, now thanks to another of its original designers (McIntyre, 1999) has had those accretions removed and others added but it still retains its fundamental form. However it no longer serves its original function as a public swimming pool and is instead now known as the Westpac (previously the Lexus) Centre, the training venue for the Collingwood Football Club. In the process of refurbishment, the building narrowly missed having a giant magpie adorning its roof and being painted in black and white stripes (McIntyre nd). Even icons it seems are not safe.

These three high profile examples indicate that there is a measure of acceptance that modern architecture might be considered worthy of heritage and that perhaps these buildings are just the same as many other, much older buildings—ready to be loved and revered by successive generations. But this has not generally been the case and it will not be the case for some years to come. Much of the reason for this comes from the nature of modern architecture and its various incarnations after World War 2 when the rupture of human conflict and cataclysmic damage done to European and Japanese cities meant that architects and planners began to fundamentally rethink the basis for the so-called new architecture. Modernism splintered into a whole series of different philosophical and aesthetic directions (Solà-Morales 1997:41-55). And this was before architectural historians and commentators were prepared to even admit that pre-World War 2 modernism was itself, a complex and diverse entity, where the compositional similarities and differences evident in the work of one of modernism’s demigods between 1925 and 1938 and exemplified by Walter Gropius’s Dessau Bauhaus (1925) and Wood house, Shipbourne, Kent (1938) represented a dramatic shift in the aesthetic and material trajectory of modern architecture.³

One of the few and first internationally to admit this new richness and diversity inherent in modern architecture was Australian architect and critic Robin Boyd who dared in the pages of the British journal *The Architectural Review* in 1951 to describe a revised opinion of functionalism as a ‘New Eclecticism’ (Boyd 1951:151-153). He used the examples of Harry Seidler’s Rose Seidler house, Wahoonga (1947-50) and Roy Grounds’s Goodes house, Frankston, Victoria (1948) to advocate the validity of a variety of approaches to conceiving modern architecture but under the all-embracing banner of functionalism. Lewis Mumford (1947) had done the same a few years earlier in his advocacy of an idea of regionalism and the Bay Region Style, using the work of William Wurster, John Ekin Dinwiddie and others to make his convincing argument for a more inclusive and humane rendition of modern architecture. Mumford’s 1947 article in *The New Yorker* caused a furore amongst the hard-line moderns such as Gropius and
Marcel Breuer. Boyd’s article was received coolly. But the Review’s editorial discussion of New Empiricism and New Brutalism, and the later controversy that Reyner Banham incited amongst the Italian architecture profession, especially Ernesto Rogers, suggest, and history has since proved, that Boyd was in fact right (Banham 1959; Rogers:1959).

So what has this meant for heritage and modern architecture? It’s created a problem child that doesn’t recognise its multiple personalities. For the public there is the stereotypical view of what constitutes modern architecture. The persistent reluctance to acknowledge the multiplicitous nature of 20th century modern architecture until relatively recently has thus engendered a common public view of the architectural profession as parents overly protective of their difficult child, not ready to admit its difference. At the same time, much modern architecture as a result has been unfairly categorised as abnormal according to a canonical view of what constitutes modern. Also at the same time, art and architectural historians themselves are frequently guilty of promulgating this same diagnosis. For years, for example, the Art Deco (or more correctly termed Moderne) building was seen as aberrant, as not really constituting a serious endeavour.

Some historians have been acutely aware of this problem. McGill University art historian Annmarie Adams, in writing of the development of the modern hospital, makes a strong argument for the advanced state of the design of a building such as Stevens & Lee’s classically-styled Ottawa Civic Hospital (1924) in Canada – that its servicing and technological innovations make it comparable to a skyscraper hotel (Adams 2008). But to match it against Alvar Aalto’s Paimio Sanatorium, Finland (1929-32), there is some doubt as to which building will be the more compelling if one was asked to preserve one of these as a piece of significant 20th century architecture. The aesthetes will decide on Aalto. The community will vote for Stevens & Lee, probably for the wrong reasons: appearances and a conventional notion of what should constitute heritage. Both buildings though are worth saving and for the same reasons. Unloved, over-loved and both misunderstood – this is the problem. There exists frequent confusion in an understanding of the three terms, modernism, modernity and modernisation, and their application as attributes in the assignment of heritage value. Each term needs unravelling and precise definition when considering twentieth century architecture. As a result, modern architecture, in its relationship with heritage, suffers from four syndromes which make problematic the question of preservation: 1) the difficult type; 2) the difficult idiom; 3) the difficult comparison; and 4) the difficult house.

These four syndromes, of course, are not the only issues facing the preservation of modern architecture. But they seem the areas in most urgent need of discussion, research and clever approaches to the idea of sensitive restoration, adaptive re-use or innovative documentation before succumbing, perhaps, to inevitable demolition.

The difficult type

One of the key tenets of modernism has been flux, the idea of zeitgeist and the embrace of the new, socially, aesthetically and technologically. The twentieth century embraced such concepts as well as modernisation across almost every discipline and aspect of life and work and this meant the rapid development of new
building types to accommodate new programs. However the corollary of the invention of new and ever more advanced building types has been the frequent raising of the spectre of obsolescence.

Perhaps nowhere more telling has this problem of an obsolete type been than in what had originally been the icon of modern architecture and the one of the origins of the so-called machine aesthetic: the factory or industrial complex. The retention of industrial buildings is often mired in problems of health and safety and finding an appropriate change of use. There of course have been success stories, and international examples such as the Van Nelle Factory, Rotterdam and Herzog & De Meuron’s conversion of the Giles Gilbert Scott-designed power station into London’s Tate Modern attest to the possibilities of culturally acceptable and financially secure adaptive re-use. There also exist futures for industrial structures of lesser architectural pedigree. One such example is the 2003 conversion of a former Nabisco box-printing factory into DIA Beacon: Riggio Galleries, a spectacular gallery on the Hudson River in upstate New York and housing the works of 1970s land artists such as Robert Smythson, Michael Heiser, and Richard Serra.

The fate of similar building types in Australia, especially the post-war factory, has been less positive. For example, in Victoria, the state heritage listing of Grounds, Romberg & Boyd’s ETA Factory in Braybrook (1957-61) was regarded as a victory for 20th century heritage. But its current status is abandonment and it is a site of daily vandalism. A similar fate awaits the award-winning Heinz Factory complex, Dandenong (1955-6) designed by Hassell & McConnell and Mussen, Mackay & Potter’s APM Boiler House, Alphington (1954) (figure 2), both landmarks of post-war industrial architecture in Australia. The major problem is not that heritage agencies and consultants are not prepared to consider listing such structures but that these factories’ large scale, their campus sites, their invariable peripheral suburban location in industrial areas, and the challenge involved in finding an appropriate new use means that the post-war factory will always remain a difficult type. Not just unloved – but in almost all cases it is an unwanted type.

A different sort of difficult type is the modern hospital, another icon of the aims and ideals of modernism. This is another building type where obsolescence, the large campus and the organic growth of such complexes have created extreme challenges for the consideration of preservation issues. There is little doubt that hospital design in 1930s Australia was employing the best of both European and American expertise in medical facility design (Willis 2006:591-597; Goad, Wilken & Willis 2004). Yet already some major 20th century Australian hospitals like Leighton Irwin’s Prince Henry’s Hospital, Melbourne (1936-9) have been demolished and with little argument or controversy (Goad 2008a). An exception was Leighton Irwin’s Canberra Hospital which was imploded in 13 July 1997 but ended in tragedy when a spectator was killed. Some hospitals are listed like Stephenson & Meldrum’s Mercy Hospital, Melbourne (1934-36) and Gloucester House, Sydney (1937), and continue to function with medically-related uses. Some like the King George V Memorial Wing for Mothers and Babies at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, Sydney (1941) continue to operate and are listed. Though rarely do they retain historically significant interior spaces like the operating theatre with its domed aluminium roof and peepholes for medical students at King George V Hospital. But for how long? Most hospital campuses are ongoing building sites with accretions and refurbishment a constant and necessary component of their existence. Indeed the organic nature of these buildings and their
rapidly changing functions and work habits means that building elements which were once integral to their function such as huge laundries, boiler houses and nurses’ homes are defunct and without ready adaptation. Added to this is the current government focus on health which means that the building of entirely new hospital complexes is often politically expedient. The future of a hospital such as Leighton Irwin’s Rachel Forster Hospital for Women in Redfern, NSW (1938-41) (figure 3) is therefore in the balance as are regional hospitals such as that the PWD-designed Mount Gambier Hospital, South Australia (1945-61). Australia is not alone in this regard, and currently in the United States, there are several difficult battles being waged – most commonly over the emotive force of the financial and political arguments for sparkling new medical facilities, exactly the same arguments which gave rise to the very buildings now under threat. The list of similar difficult types is endless, but of especial interest in terms of threat are the venues of postwar popular recreation and entertainment. Only a tiny handful of drive-in cinemas remain across the country, and the same goes for the slowly diminishing number of purpose-built ten-pin bowling alleys, lawn bowls clubs, and squash courts. Obsolescence is one of the main indicators of the syndrome of the difficult type. It also lies behind the difficulty of preserving major sporting structures, especially stadia. In 2002, the retention of part of the only ever partially built VFL Park stadium in Mulgrave in suburban Melbourne was a major victory for heritage but it now sits as a huge ungainly Brutalist monolith amidst a vast housing development – a bizarre heritage memento rather than necessarily a useful outcome.

Obsolescence and constant change are endemic to retail, hospitality or shop front architecture. The Legend Café, formerly of Bourke Street, Melbourne (1956), designed by Clement Meadmore (1929-2005), later to achieve international fame as an abstract sculptor based in New York, and with artworks by Leonard French (depicting the travels of Sinbad the sailor) have now been, perhaps appropriately consigned to the stuff of legend, their design only available through archival record or publication (Carter 2008:126-127). But the most irrevocably obsolete type of the commercial world would have to be the post-war shopping centre. A fine example of the post-war shopping mall, Tompkins Shaw & Evans’s Southland Shopping Centre in Cheltenham in Melbourne’s suburban heartland won awards from the architectural profession in 1969 soon after its completion. Involving contemporary art both inside and out and a roof garden of native trees and shrubs, Southland was the epitome of a new form of sophisticated suburban shopping experience. Today, like the modern hospital, it has been entirely engulfed by subsequent addition and expansion. The reality of preservation in cases such as these is comprehensive documentation by archival collection, digital or oral history, or magisterial written accounts of the difficult type such as that compiled by Richard Longstreth on the development of the regional shopping mall in the United States (Longstreth 1997, 1999). The suburban shopping centre is not necessarily unloved. No, it is, almost without exception, just smothered by alteration and addition and totally without the possibility of heritage redemption.

The difficult idiom

A syndrome of modern architecture that works against its retention is the non-sanctioned modernist idiom, or put more simply the styles which the public and/or the profession love to hate or does not yet know how to comprehend. One of these, for example, is the difficulty in dealing with the delicacy and refinement of Wrightian-inspired non-residential buildings in a dense urban setting like Chancellor &
Patrick’s ES&A Bank in Elizabeth Street, Melbourne (1959-61). Despite listing and also despite original plans for a tower to rise above it, this once excellent example of a Wrightian/Griffin-inspired civic architecture has since had more than ten storeys erected directly on top of it, at complete odds with the intricate scale, detail and massing at ground level.

There are three of these idioms which have yet to be fully theorised and appreciated within an Australian context, and as such are especially unloved. The first is the idiom that goes by the unfortunate title of Brutalism, which in and of itself has defied complete definition and arouses deep suspicion, and has most commonly been associated with off-form concrete rather than regarded as a diverse critique of the machine aesthetic of pre-war modernism. In Australia, there was a substantial take-up of this idiom within state government works departments, and applied to the design of large educational institutions that sprawled across bush sites such as the Ku-ring-gai College, Sydney (1973, NSW Government Architect (JW Thompson), design architect: David Turner) and the later Alexander Mackie College of Advanced Education, Oatley, Sydney (1980, NSW Government Architect (JW Thompson), design architect: Colin Still). It is clear that for buildings such as these to have long and enduring futures, their client body must be receptive to their design characteristics and resist the temptation to paint, paper over and cover these building’s robust bones, or compromise the scale of their ambitious site coverage.

Faith in a client body, it seems, has to be left to chance. But what happens when a heritage agency has to deal with a listed Brutalist building? The case of the Harold Holt Swimming Centre, Glen Iris (1969) (figure 4) designed by Kevin Borland and Daryl Jackson is perhaps typical of the dilemma faced by heritage authorities when it comes to dealing with the adaptive re-use or the refurbishment of Brutalist buildings. The tough language of unadorned concrete or concrete block, the use of industrial materials and the frank expression of structure does not necessarily meet local council expectations of comfort, revenue raising or ‘beauty’ and even architects when dealing with such a design challenge seem ill-equipped to deal sensitively with the Brutalist idiom. After a four-year community battle with the local council and public objections to plans approved by Heritage Victoria, additions and alterations to the complex went ahead. However the architectural outcome was the result of a compromised process. There is also serious doubt as to whether the result has respected the architectural significance of the original design. The key problem is that Australian architecture awaits an exemplary patron and an exemplary adaptive reuse of a Brutalist building. In short, Australian Brutalism needs a champion.

The second difficult and related idiom is the 1960s and 1970s megastructure. These buildings, often classified under the banner of Brutalism, involved structural and planning strategies that resolved large complexes for office, educational, or even hospital programs. Canberra is the major focus of this work and Harry Seidler’s Trade Group Offices at Barton (1973) aided by the engineering expertise of Pier Luigi Nervi and John Andrews’s Woden TAFE (1976-81) with its plan of multiple polygons are excellent and largely intact examples of this uncompromising architectural approach. However, arguably the most important example of the Australian megastructure, John Andrews’s much earlier Cameron Offices at Belconnen (1967-72), despite national heritage listing and repeated substantial campaigns by the Australian Institute of Architects, have failed to save the building in its entirety. Of the seven fingers of this vast development, only three remain as the Federal Government, ACT State Government and the building’s current owner progressively destroy what can be argued to be one of the world’s leading examples of megastructural architecture. Yet, one has to wonder whether, with a sensitive hand, an appropriate conversion to apartments might have been conceivable within the overall parameters of John Andrews’s rigorous systems approach to design. Like the hospital, the shopping centre and the factory, part of the difficulty in retaining a structure like this or adapting it to a new use is its sheer scale and the realities of its unrelenting aesthetic appearance.

A quite different, almost completely opposite challenge is posed by the third difficult post-war idiom, what I would describe as the New Formalism, and which can be seen in the contextual and stylistic allusions of buildings such as Darwin’s former Supreme Court (c.1961, now demolished) and Bunning & Madden’s National Library of Australia, Canberra (1964) with
its prim classicism and rich adornment of materials and finishes specific to its time.\textsuperscript{18} Never considered popular by the architectural profession and regarded as somewhat retardataire, the series of buildings designed in this idiom are readily overlooked as being, in Robin Boyd’s words, dangerously featurist with their flaunting of materials, fine art and precious detail.\textsuperscript{19} Faithful retention of these buildings requires, as does a Boom Style building of the 1880s, a ready commitment to the spirit of their creation. Such buildings parallel not just the work of Edward Durrell Stone and the Architects Collaborative in their work for the US Embassy program overseas in locations like New Delhi and Athens (Loeffler 1998), but also a long standing and almost completely undocumented interest by Australian architects in postwar Italian architecture.

Thus even Italian architect Mario Bellini (who one could argue should have known better) and his Melbourne counterparts, Metier III, in their 1997 refurbishment of Roy Grounds’s National Gallery of Victoria (1968) completely missed a unique opportunity to celebrate, through heritage, a fine example of a contextually and materially rich answer to Melbourne’s bluestone past and its 19th century Renaissance Revival pedigree, and a building which drew directly on Grounds’s experience of contemporary Italian museum designs of the late 1950s (Goad 2008b:349-358). Interiors which celebrated local materials such as Victorian ash panelling, baffles, bluestone and woollen fabrics, as well as all of the custom-designed cabinetry of Grant & Mary Featherston were all completely removed in favour of angled screens, cutouts and curving soffits in the central court and painted plaster walls that revert to the orthodox salons of yore. At least, Bellini and his collaborators did little to Grounds’s Great Hall with its Leonard French ceiling – but why not at least reinstate the original gold Victorian wool carpet?

In residential architecture, this idiom is at its greatest risk. Thus in examples such as Guilford Bell’s Macfarlane house, Vaucluse, NSW (1971) with its De Chirico arches and allusions to houses of the Middle East, the reference to style, the use of ornament and luxurious materials should not be seen as invalid or a sign of ‘weakness’ but rather a particular response to a particular client, location and program – in effect supporting Boyd’s earlier argument for a so-

**Figure 5:** Kindergarten and clinic, Erindale, SA (1960). The kindergarten is still in active use, though it has been repainted and its internal timber mural/screen removed.

Architect: Brian Claridge
Photographer: Ingerson Arnold
Source: Cross-Section Archive, Architecture Library, University of Melbourne

**Figure 6:** The nurses’ home at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, Camperdown, NSW (1951-4), shown in its vacant state, 2009.

Architects: Stephenson & Turner
Photographer: Cameron Logan
The critical act in purchasing a house such as this is correct advice, and, if prospective owners such as billionaire James Packer can afford to pay $18 million for such a house, then what is really at stake here is the opportunity for education as to patrimony, philanthropy and a genuine contribution to the culture rather than a loss, like the demolition of yet another Guilford Bell house, such as the Horden House, Point Piper (1956) in the 1980s.

The difficult comparison

The third syndrome is the difficult comparison and relates to the post-war building boom and the provision of multiple examples of buildings related to community infrastructure, commercial buildings or buildings for the everyday. How does one distinguish between which one of hundreds of baby health care centres, kindergartens, primary and secondary schools and municipal libraries is worthy of retention (figure 5) or which buildings might be let go? Which community is more worthy than another? Should one preserve one of these buildings, a series, or none at all? This is not a new challenge and can equally apply to buildings and structures of the nineteenth century in Australia but the difference is that in terms of post-World War 2 architecture, one is dealing inevitably with much greater numbers and with an idiom that many people feel is unremarkable despite the often extremely strong community attachment to buildings, say like the local tennis or bowling club. The reality, clearly, is that one must accept loss but make careful and considered judgment and also run the real risk that by ‘letting go’ a library, kindergarten or maternal health and welfare centre, that one might be taking away fragments of a larger community whole, in many cases removing a key part of a significant precinct of, in themselves, architecturally unremarkable small community buildings.

The same also applies to repetitive houses, flats and housing. Which Pettit and Sevitt house does one fight for? Just one? A street of them or the first display home? Similarly, with the various housing commission estates built across Australia in the postwar decades, the villa estates especially are those which are at greatest risk of silently disappearing. Never greatly loved, they lie out of the range of those bodies interested in residential heritage – the comfortable and the proud – and as such are rarely defended. Even more unloved are the high-density experiments of the government housing agencies of the postwar years, such as those of the Housing Commission of Victoria. These are internationally the examples that many people truly love to hate. The hopeful vision of those experiments points to the core reason behind modernism’s self-inflicted persecution: the quest for tabula rasa development. The presence of the high-density high rise housing block was often the cause of a significant loss of heritage. So why even think of protecting them, even considering them as heritage? Certainly the windscreen surveys of the 1950s were brutal in their recommendations for destruction. But again, it may not be just heritage which might be a reason for retaining these developments in some form. A clear assessment of the social significance of these developments not just in terms of their historical beginning but their continuity in certain inner suburban areas which otherwise would have succumbed to progressive gentrification is warranted. In short, a new appreciation of these unloved modern landmarks could have a beneficial effect on the future social sustainability of these buildings and their precincts.

The same question can be considered in respect of the truly unloved – the hated ‘six-pack’ flat of the 1960s, most built by developers and some emanating from the hands of designers...
of note (Pickett 2009); or the problem of now defunct but substantial nurses’ homes attached to major hospitals (figure 6). These structures, attached to major city and regional hospitals, were of a scale that often far exceeded other metropolitan apartment blocks at the time and often incorporated extensive gardens, tennis courts and car parking. These are the unloved members of the modernist family of which almost all, given changes to nursing residential requirements, are ready to be abandoned to an uncertain fate.

The essence of the difficult comparison is the notion of the everyday or, to use a phrase borrowed from Paul Alan Johnson, ‘the radically ordinary’. Can one envisage public campaigns to save a public toilet such as the Melbourne City Council-designed block (1957) in Treasury Gardens with its floating concrete roof and crazy-paved walls and which DOCOMOMO Australia members did indeed try to resist in 2006 (Johns 2006) (figure 7)? Or, which concrete Bini shell designed by Dante Bini should be preserved of the two hundred or so constructed in schools across New South Wales (Dept of Public Works & Services 1977)? Combine the problem of numbers with a lack of visual or spatial charm and the challenge is to find the community, municipal or state government will to recognise everyday precincts and individual examples. Or else, should one document ordinariness and bequeath it as heritage to the realm of memory, nostalgia or, in the case of Howard Arkley’s paintings of Australia’s suburban houses, art?

The difficult house

The fourth syndrome is that of the difficult house. From the outset, however, it should be made clear that there have been many success stories in the past three decades with respect to the postwar house. In 1981, the gift of Heide II (1968), the Mt Gambier limestone house designed by McGlashan & Everist for John and Sunday Reed, to the state of Victoria as a museum/gallery enabled an entirely new public habitation of that house, and a strength of community feeling for, sympathy towards and understanding of the 1960s forms and spaces of its interior. The same has occurred in Sydney with the generous gift of the Rose Seidler House, Wahroonga (1948-50), designed by Viennese émigré architect Harry Seidler, to the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales (now Sydney Living Museums). As a vehicle for getting the problem child of modern architecture acclimatised to contemporary society, the Rose Seidler house and its associated public programs have been an extraordinary success.

In 2008, the Esmond Dorney House (1948-50, 59) at Fort Nelson in Hobart was purchased by the City of Hobart and the sale included the beautiful land, all to be preserved and made available to the public. Dorney, who had originally practised successfully in Melbourne in the 1930s, after a traumatic war experience, had removed to Tasmania to rebuild his personal life and his practice. His house became a symbol of that re-birth, a form of existential reinvention. Built over the foundations of a gun emplacement, Dorney’s polygonal plan for the house’s

Figure 8: Boyd house II, South Yarra, VIC (1959). Architects: Grounds Romberg & Boyd (Robin Boyd) Courtesy, photographer: Mark Strizic
living block was centred on the concentric steps of an 8-metre diameter gun-pit that became a recessed living room/hearth surrounded by a polygonal wall of glass opening onto spectacular views across the Derwent River.

However while these are good news stories, as Mark Viner and Caroline Butler-Bowden have observed, the Seidler house is (as is the Dorney house) “very fragile”, a delicate object sensitive to public wear and tear, and increasingly, harsh climatic conditions of light and heat that make such houses difficult in economic terms to maintain (Viner and Butler-Bowden 2009). One of the most alluring characteristics of 1950s houses is their airiness and insectile lightness. But accompanying these characteristics are the thinnest of structures, huge areas of glass and materials and finishes often of limited life and quality. These are difficult houses because of the period in which they were constructed and technically, they invariably require scientific and technical expertise of a profoundly superior quality than experienced before.

The Boyd House II in South Yarra (1957-9) (figure 8) is now in the hands of the Robin Boyd Foundation, a non-profit organisation, and one can on various occasions gain access to one of Australia’s most important private houses: an exciting reinvention of the nineteenth century terrace house as a dwelling with parents and children’s zones separated by a garden courtyard and with a draped roof of steel cables slung over the top. However the fragility of the Boyd House is such that major works are currently required to stabilise the ever-drooping droop of its innovative roof. The Foundation has also decided not to make this a museum house and conscientiously restricts access to the public, given not just the fragility of the structure, its small spaces and modest public facilities available but also because of the wear and tear on carpets, cork floors, and the garden as well as the inevitable health and safety risks associated with such a daring house.

So the house is difficult when it needs to be brought out in public. But even when a significant or even marginally less significant 1950s or 1960s house is in private ownership, there is again a certain level of informed patronage that is necessary. Houses such as this need tender loving care as no problem child ever has. One could never think in any way but this and it remains for significant single house examples of the 1970s like Iwan Iwanoff’s Marsala House, 1973 in Perth to be similarly celebrated, and its life carefully manicured. It also remains for local councils to be brave enough to develop new approaches to conventional notions of streetscape control, recognising that many of these houses of the 1950s through to the 1970s actively and deliberately did not follow conventional notions of addressing the street: often celebrating the carport, having blank high walls concealing courtyard gardens behind, possessed abstract compositions of form and denied conventional notions of what a ‘home’ might look like, and invariably focussed living spaces onto rear gardens rather celebrate entry or the idea of a ‘street’ address. In so many ways, the modern house is difficult because it challenges orthodox notions of what is meant by a heritage streetscape and its underlying planning controls, a concept which in many cases will spell effectively the demise of such houses in older suburban areas.

Some kind of understanding...

As a conclusion therefore, some form of therapy rather than cure for the problem child of modern architecture is required. For there will be no complete cure as there has never been one for any unloved era of architecture. The following strategies are thus offered as means of better
understanding modern architecture. Most of these strategies are not new. Indeed they are stunningly orthodox but what is suggested is that the critical aspect of each of these strategies is communication or to use a current cliché, knowledge exchange. A better understanding of the heritage approaches to recent architecture and place requires constant education and regular updating of technical expertise, not just for the public but also for the heritage profession as a whole.

**Typological studies**

Without doubt, there is a role for typological studies, for commissioned and detailed national studies of building types over an extended historical period. Ross Thorne’s comprehensive 1981 study of Australian cinemas was seminal in this regard, as was Jennifer Taylor’s Australian Heritage Commission report (1994) for a national study of high-rise office buildings from 1945 until 1975 and its subsequent publication as a monograph (Thorne 1981; Taylor & Stewart 1994; Taylor 2001). More recently Caroline Butler-Bowden and Charles Pickett’s book (2007) on the development of apartments in Australia has opened the field on Australian urban history in a way that no other book on housing has done previously. Now there is a dire need for national studies on postwar building types such as schools, churches, factories to name just a few, as a way of assembling of a body of shared knowledge as the basis for serious comparative analysis.

**Monographs on architects and styles**

In addition to typological studies, there is a need for new series of publicly available studies on the work of individual architects or firms, like Dirk Bolt (1930-), for example, who practised in Tasmania and Canberra, and who was one of Australia’s early accomplished exponents of what became known as Brutalism (figure 9). Monographs on architects like Russell Ellis (Bird 2007), Brian Claridge (Dutkeiwicz 2008), Neville Gruzman (Gruzman & Goad 2006), Hayes & Scott (Wilson 2005), Kevin Borland (Evans 2006), Neil Clerahan (Edquist & Black 2005), and Peter Muller (Urford 2009) and the series of monographs on Western Australian architects like Jeffrey Howlett, Gordon Finn, Geoffrey Summerhayes and Krantz & Sheldon have been invaluable in expanding, in a short space of time, the knowledge of postwar practice. Importantly, new and broader understandings of modern architecture come, albeit incrementally, through the publication of these monographs. The diminutive monograph on James Birrell, for example, enabled a whole suite of modern architecture including his Centenary Pool, Brisbane (1959), previously unacknowledged, to become part of the canon (Wilson & Macarthur 1997). A similar expansion of knowledge is provided by guidebooks, conservation studies or focussed research monographs on major towns and cities such as Robert Irving’s excellent account of Wollongong’s twentieth century heritage (Irving 2001). The same need for studies of national scope is evident for difficult idioms like Brutalism, New Formalism, or regional studies such as Barry McNeill and Leigh Woolley’s *Architecture from the Edge* (2002) or groups of architects such as émigré architects or those working within a government architect’s office such as the extraordinary body of work produced under the aegis of EH Farmer and JW Thompson in New South Wales in the postwar decades (McNeill & Woolley 2002).

Another key study to be undertaken is a postwar account of buildings and sites constructed as part of an ongoing reconciliation process with Australian indigenous peoples. Buildings such as Peter Myers’, *Keeping Place*, Tiwi Island, Northern Territory (1980) need to be identified and celebrated as early and creative collaborations with indigenous people. It was an exemplary
project at the time and there are others such as Olga Kosterin’s Brewarrina Aboriginal Cultural Museum, NSW (1990) that predate works by well-known architects like Gregory Burgess, Troppo Architects and Glenn Murcutt.28

**Exhibition**

Another, though unfortunately rare, opportunity to develop a greater understanding of modern architecture is through exhibition. Major exhibitions such as *Modern Times: the untold story of modernism in Australia*, curated by Ann Stephen and its accompanying catalogue can offer new insights and sometimes bring to light previously unseen examples such as Harold H. Smith’s remarkable Star of David-shaped section for the synagogue at Bankstown, NSW (1960) (figure 10) (Stephen, Goad & McNamara 2008:133). Other exhibitions, such as *Cool: the 1960s Brisbane House* held at Queensland University of Technology, brought to light and life an entire suite of material, unseen and with important biographical studies (Avery, Dennis & Whitman 2004). *Living in Landscape* at Heide Museum of Modern Art in 2006 was able to bring to new significance the houses of David McGlashan and Neil Everist in Melbourne, and in many respects expanded public understanding of the aesthetic value of 1960s houses (Heide 2006). *Living in Landscape* involved not only an exhibition but also a published catalogue and public programs involving one of the original architects, tours to a series of houses across metropolitan Melbourne and the Mornington Peninsula, and media appearances on radio.29

The importance of the exhibition format is its focused attention on an individual architect, period or style and its public dissemination through a variety of media.

**Listing**

At the very least, the process of listing significant works of twentieth century architecture goes a long way towards increasing the visibility of modern architecture. In this regard web-based digital listings of national and state heritage agencies, National Trust bodies and database projects supported by national research funding are of extreme importance, accessible across the nation and, if accompanied by images and accurate description, allow swift comparison. Another layer of the listing process is the digitally-based index and the time is ripe for Miles Lewis’s Australian Architectural Index to be expanded to the end of the twentieth century. Further, the placing of local conservation studies online is another excellent way of ensuring that the invaluable research undertaken at municipal scale is not lost but able to be used and accessed by others. For example, the Melbourne-based practice Heritage Alliance’s study of inter-war and post-war architecture in the Melbourne municipality of Bayside (2008) endured much opposition from residents and councillors but, through its public posting digitally, was able to enter the public realm and its vital research, especially on postwar domestic architecture, shared across the nation.30

**Networks**

There is no doubt that increased knowledge comes through increased communication facilitated by networks across a range of professional disciplines, especially since the documentation, technical knowledge and heritage practice as it relates to the twentieth century is an expanding field. Stronger connections with and knowledge of the work of urban and social historians

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**Figure 11:** The Beaurepaire Centre, University of Melbourne, Parkville, VIC (1956-7), shown at its completion in 1957. The centre was restored and refurbished by heritage architects Lovell Chen in 2003-4.
Architects: Eggleston, Macdonald & Secomb
Photographer: Beaver Photographic
Source: *Cross-Section Archive, Architecture Library, University of Melbourne*
is critical. So also is the participation in international networks engaging in research on twentieth century architecture such as DOCOMOMO, ICOMOS, Association for Preservation Technology (APT), Britain’s Twentieth Century Society as well as conferences and publications emanating from scholarly organisations such as the Societies of Architectural Historians in Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain and the United States. The special issue of DOCOMOMO Journal (29, September 2003) devoted to Modernism in the Asia Pacific and guest edited by Sheridan Burke, for example, was an excellent means of understanding Australian modernist architecture within the context of a region where comparable articles on Singapore, Hong Kong, New Zealand and other locations enable sound comparison. Engagement, for example, by Burke, Susan MacDonald, Scott Robertson, Jennifer Hill, Hannah Lewi, Louise Cox and others in the activities of DOCOMOMO has been exemplary and their ambassadorship has further enabled expertise and new knowledge to be disseminated both in and out of Australia.

Champions

There is also the need for champions of the problem child, whether these take place in the form of, say Fran Stropin and Susan Marsden’s Twentieth century heritage: marking the recent past (2001), a gentle manifesto aimed at securing government support (often the hardest body to convince but when convinced a firm supporter) for modern architecture (Stropin and Marsden 2001), or a body like the Australian Institute of Architects (AIA) and their granting of national and state 25-year awards which ensures ongoing and regular peer recognition of exemplary works of recent heritage. Such 25-year awards to buildings like Yuncken Freeman’s BHP House, Melbourne (1967-73) assist government and heritage agencies in better determining priorities and gauging opinion. There is also the commitment by some of these champions to celebrate potentially unloved modern buildings. The commitment, for example, of the AIA Western Australian Chapter to occupy the refurbished David Foulkes Taylor showroom, Nedlands (1965) by émigré architect Julius Elischer as a new chapter headquarters, demonstrates through best practice, a commitment to the preservation and ongoing life of recent modern architecture. Significant too was the AIA NSW Chapter’s commitment to support Anne Higham in her compilation of architects’ biographies. To date, apart from Higham’s work, no such comprehensive contemporary source on individual Australian architects of the twentieth century exists.31

Exemplars

Finally, one of the best forms of therapy is the celebration of exemplars, i.e. examples of modern architecture that have either been lovingly restored or refurbished with proven realistic, relevant and ongoing functions. While it is relatively easy to point to individual houses that fit these criteria, it is commercial and public buildings that deserve our stronger advocacy and public celebration. A clear example is the 2003-4 refurbishment of Eggleston Macdonald & Secomb’s Beaurepaire Centre, University of Melbourne (1956-7) (figure 11) by heritage architects Lovell Chen. Here was the case of a university swimming pool, changing rooms, trophy hall and gymnasium, almost fifty years old and desperately requiring upgrading in terms of servicing, health and safety, overall maintenance, as well as being hopelessly out of date in terms of student expectations of a fitness centre. For a university campus of some 35,000 plus students, the decision to retain the heritage-listed sports complex was not a simple one. But, careful reconfiguring of services, statutory compliance and changing to a new model of gymnasium/
sports centre, and with design and technical-based heritage expertise, the refurbishment and restoration was in 2004 a recipient of an AIA award for adaptive reuse.

Conclusion

In the end, there always needs to be acknowledgment that some aspects, perhaps even a great deal of unloved architecture will stay that way and simply become part of the disposable fabric of our everyday life. Examples will come and go according to time and according to the vagaries of functional, social and economic circumstances of the day. It is little wonder that buildings subject to financial and market pressures like Karl Langer’s Lennons Broadbeach Hotel, Surfers Paradise (1958) (figure 12) disappear almost without trace or that we find it hard to insulate, through the mechanisms of heritage, the local milk-bar, petrol station or fast-food outlet where the ad-hoc plastering of advertising, lighting and signage bequeath a rich sense of use value. At the same time, one should not be guilty of a complete laissez-faire attitude to the contemporary building. The key is that almost all orthodox approaches to heritage assessment, for the most part, apply equally to buildings and places old and new.

Yet, given the poor run of modern architecture in defining a positive outcome for the experience of the city over the last fifty years, there will need to be much time and education before that reasonableness and positive disinterest in terms of assessment might be logically accepted.

Instead, for many who might be sympathetic to modern architecture’s social and aesthetic goals, a large number must feel like the hapless narrow-minded architect Professor Otto Silenus in Evelyn Waugh’s novel Decline and Fall (1928) who, when building a modernist folly for Mrs Best-Chetwynde, says wistfully: “I do not think it is possible for domestic architecture to be beautiful, but I am doing my best.” The same might be said for heritage professionals and much of twentieth century modern architecture: that it might not be possible for it to be beautiful yet, but heritage professionals are doing their best to make it understood that at some point in the future modern architecture might be able to reasonably possess those qualities.

At present, it is easy to love the certain familiarity and human scale of the buildings, lanes and glazed arcades of the nineteenth and early twentieth century Australian city. Of the modernist city and its constituent elements, which overthrew those certainties, it is less easy but definitely possible to love and defend these spaces of our recent past - but only with time and a heavy dose of therapy.

References


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Endnotes

1 Three categories of practice bypassed by orthodox histories were identified as 1. the metropolitan (e.g. 1930s street architecture, the post-war church, institutional buildings like the art gallery or town hall); 2. commercial (e.g. the Moderne, post-war skyscrapers, department stores, car showrooms, motels and shopping malls); and 3. the everyday (e.g. interwar and postwar eclectic house styles, ephemeral buildings like shop fit outs and restaurant interiors, postwar industrial structures, petrol stations and neon signs).

2 The Sidney Myer Music Bowl was designed by the Melbourne firm of Yuncken Freeman Bros., Griffiths & Simpson. The Bowl’s key designers, Barry Patten (1927-2003) and Angel Dimitroff were closely involved in discussions regarding the Bowl’s conservation assessment, restoration and refurbishment.

3 The Wood house was undertaken by Walter Gropius when briefly in partnership with British architect Maxwell Fry. Also working on the project was young Geelong-trained architect Arthur Baldwinson.


5 The stereotypical view of modern architecture is invariably flat-roofed buildings of an unrelenting appearance often associated with glazed office towers or high-rise public housing projects.

6 For example, Donald Leslie Johnson makes reference to “early modern and later aberrations including Art Deco” (Johnson 1980:96).

7 For extensive reflection, for example, on the word modernism, see Forty (2000).

8 The concept of modernism and flux is described by Berman (1982).


10 Dia Beacon was created by the Dia Art Foundation, artist Robert Irwin, and architects OpenOffice. See Cooke and Govan (2003).

11 Editor’s note: The King George V hospital building is now used for administration purposes and is suffering from an acute lack of maintenance.

12 I am grateful to Dr Cameron Logan, Research Fellow, Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning, University of Melbourne and Kathi Hillier, curator of the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital Museum, Camperdown, NSW for bringing the period image of the operating theatre to my attention.

13 I am grateful to Kate McDougall for bringing the plight of Mt Gambier Hospital to my attention.

14 For example, currently under threat is the Moderne skyscraper-styled Charity Hospital, New Orleans, Louisiana (1937-9, architects: Weiss, Dreyfous and Seiferth). See Robert Ivy, “What will happen to Charity Hospital and other endangered projects?: a fresh look at the state of Historic Preservation”, Architectural Record, June 2009, pp. 55-58. Another endangered hospital project is the campus and buildings of the Michael Reese Hospital, Chicago (197-60) designed by Walter Gropius, The Architects Collaborative, and Loebl, Schlossman and Bennett, with landscape architecture by Lester Collins, Hideo Sasaki and Paul Novak. See www.savemrh.com.

15 For the most comprehensive description of Brutalism, see Banham (1966).

16 For issues facing the preservation of postwar architecture in New South Wales, especially those concerning government-designed Brutalist buildings, see Architecture Bulletin, May/June 2009.
17 See submission on Cameron Offices, Belconnen prepared by Paolo Tombesi and Philip Goad on behalf of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects, 2006.

18 Another example of this idiom would be the marble clad symmetrical forms of Godfrey Spowers, Hughes, Mewton & Lobb’s Masonic Centre and Dallas Brooks Hall, East Melbourne (1965-7).

19 For a definition of Featurism, see Boyd (1960:8-12).


21 Jonathan Chancellor, “Packer’s $18m digs set for demolition”, Sydney Morning Herald, 20 June 2009. Editor’s note: Fortunately, the Guilford Bell-designed house has been retained in a large Packer family compound. The demolition of adjoining houses allowed the construction of new facilities and the retention of the Bell house.

22 For an overview of municipal buildings constructed in Australia, c.1920-1975, see Lewi and Nichols (2010).

23 Important discussions on this topic include the special issue of DOCUMENTO Journal, 39 (2008) on post-war housing and Prudon (2008:268-301).

24 For example, substantial nurses’ homes attached to Prince Henry’s Hospital, Melbourne and the Royal Melbourne Hospital have already been demolished and the huge nurses’ home at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, Camperdown in Sydney is currently derelict.

25 This term was used by Paul-Alan Johnson (1996:113-128).

26 Some of Bolt’s important buildings include (with D. Hartley Wilson) Christ College, University of Tasmania (1960) and the Bathing Pavilion, Lower Sandy Bay, Tasmania (1962); and (as Dirk Bolt & Associates) Burgmann College, Australian National University, Canberra (1971).

27 Monographs on Jeffrey Howlett (1992), Geoffrey Summerhayes (1993), Gordon Finn (1995) and Krantz & Sheldon (1996) were published by the School of Architecture at the University of Western Australia.

28 See Brennand (2004:95-104). I am grateful to Laila Haglund for bringing the Brewarrina Aboriginal Cultural Museum and the work of Kate Brennand to my attention.

29 The Living in Landscape exhibition in 2006 also became the impetus and model for two subsequent exhibitions of modern houses, notably Aspendale Beach: an artists’ haven (2008) and Out of the Square: beach architecture on the Mornington Peninsula (2009), both curated by Rodney James at the Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery.


31 Editor’s note: Anne Higham’s work is being continued by her successor at the AIA NSW Chapter, Dr Noni Boyd. Their work was, and continues to be, partly funded by the NSW Heritage Office.