

Daryl Jackson on Robin Boyd

Daryl Jackson, B.Arch., Dip.Arch. (Melb.) ARAIA, ARIBA, from the Melbourne partnership of Daryl Jackson and Evan Walker, discusses Robin Boyd from the viewpoint of a younger generation in architecture. The discussion ranges through Daryl Jackson's relationship with Robin Boyd; Boyd's impact on architecture; his influence on architects beyond him (the younger generation) and the differences between them.

Relationship

Although Daryl Jackson had been very much aware of Robin Boyd, through his writing and work, since his days as a student architect in Melbourne, he didn't meet him until 1963, in the United States. Jackson was at that time working for Paul Rudolph, and Boyd was in the States as a contributor to the American Institute of Architects Design Conference in Aspen Colorado. On Daryl Jackson's return to Melbourne the directorship of the Institute's Housing Service became vacant, and he was asked to apply for the position by the retiring director. Robin Boyd was chairman of the Housing Service, and Daryl Jackson administered the Service from 1964-1969.

During this time, through a number of committee meetings, Daryl Jackson got to know Robin Boyd fairly well. Often those committee meetings would develop into discussions, because "that's the kind of person Robin was".

"Our relationship was a friendship and we would occasionally go to lunch or dinner together. Robin was great to talk over ideas with, and was one of the few people you could go to dinner with and actually want to talk about buildings and architecture. He was very receptive and perceptive and these were good exchanges. Through his comments you were able to focus on viewpoints yourself. There wasn't a conscious: 'must ring Robin and get to grips with that problem', — the occasions made themselves."

Daryl Jackson feels that this sharing of references about architecture with Robin Boyd did have its effect on him, and also commented that he was the only architect of his generation that he would really want to approach in this way.

"He was a great enthusiast and people responded to this, and the enthusiasm raised the idealism. With Robin, you always sensed the idealism first."

Impact and influences

"I think Robin Boyd's major impact on architecture was via his true internationalism as a critic—the only Australian to achieve that status."

"This is what made him unique and valid to the younger generation. He was an architects' architect, prepared to write, talk and think architecture, and his personal example has great relevance, in this role."

"He was so well liked because of his personal commitment to architecture, the profession and other people and for the plane of his personal integrity, in a profession noted for its professional jealousies. Robin was beyond that. His humility and also his dedication, strong love and defence of Australia gained and won great influence."

"I think he was a shy man and that there were few other architects of his generation with whom he spent time. There was of course the partnership with Grounds and Romberg, but Neil Clerehan and Peter McIntyre were perhaps the two who knew him best. I think Robin suffered from being lonely in his generation, because there were few who went through school with him who continued to match his continuing zeal. You could contrast this with the younger people in Sydney today. Even if they don't see a lot of each other there is still a common viewpoint and sense of movement and there are enough of them around to not feel the loneliness of the long distance architect."

"Undoubtedly he lacked opportunity in the big commission and he once said to me that he thought this was because he was a critic and the client didn't want the controversial critic as the designer of a major investment. He was renowned primarily for his houses, each of them tackling the individual solution, rather than for his big buildings. These don't come to mind as major influences on a younger generation in their formal content or method of solving problems. Even the way Robin solved his house problems wasn't a formal influence on architects practising here."

"Robin was a highly visual person and was aware of what was happening internationally. If anyone was going to be affected by what was happening internationally in architectural styles, it was he. As a prolific reader of international journals and a contributor to them as well as a prolific traveller he might have been one of the few people to introduce into Australia internationalism. Architecture is still affected by style or form, irrespective of all social considerations."

In answer to the question of whether Robin Boyd was ahead of his time, Daryl Jackson said yes, in terms of other people practising in Australia at that time. "Robin was very conscious of other decision makers—Australian businessmen or politicians of his age group—looking elsewhere for ideas, and transferring them back here. This is what was happening in that period of the 50's and has continued throughout the 60's. Perhaps my own generation doesn't feel that so much. All Robin's writing shows the cultural isolation he felt as an individual."

Differences in practice

"Robin made us aware through his writing of the ugliness of the Australian suburbia in such a way that it was a visual statement. He was a highly visual architect and I think my generation has been affected much more by behavioural thinking and we're prepared to be more aware of the sociological understandings of society, the political and economic factors involved. That's not to say that Robin didn't understand or think about those elements, but he chose to write more about the visual result of these factors and 'The Australian Ugliness' is a criticism of that result without necessarily probing very deeply all the causal relationships. I think that's a generational difference." "He was of that age group trained to think of architecture as the one-off, the single building, the one commission. The generation wasn't greatly affected by urban values and the sense of continuity inherent in urbanism; but almost by the sense of separation, of individualism in architecture. This comes, I think, from the time when architecture saw itself as the saviour of society—inherited from the great form givers changing the whole history of architecture." "I suppose we are more existential in the way in which we respond to matters, tending to be more affected by and immersed in society as a whole rather than exclusive. The terms 'exclusive' and 'inclusive' are important. Architects in the past have been very exclusive about society and their relationship to it. In turn this is how society sees them." "For example, we have our offices in a building which was previously the Fitwell Shoe factory. The building exterior hasn't been upgraded and we haven't sought to make a great style statement at all. You couldn't see Robin practising in such an office, so perhaps that's a symbolic difference."

"I'm not sure where Robin stands in terms of liberating function or embalming function. The architect's role is, I believe, to liberate function; with the form of the building seen as a counter-form to the inter-action of the people involved."

"Some of Robin's buildings were very controlled and neat packages. On the other hand, what I like about him was that he was particularly changeable. If you look at his houses you see a spectrum of change all the way through. Albeit each one unique, each one changing, each one showing that his mind was receptive to other ideas and influences, some from outside, some from within himself."

"Robin's houses had a particularity about each solution. Now architects tend to think not so much about the particularity of each solution but the universality of each solution. What is the sense of the overlapping function? Can the one object do three jobs? It's related to greater efficiency. Some of the overlapping functions we cannot even know about at the time we are designing. We get this understanding from society itself. In a sense architects have failed society and I would like to think that we are being analytical about that and changing ourselves in relationship to society."

"In a very healthy way, I think society is pressuring the architect. This makes the architect, if he wants to respond, an inclusive person, rather than an exclusive one. Robin probably contributed to making that society pressure architects, by making them more aware of architecture, but almost of his terms, the highly visual terms. He too was affected by the current changes we are all affected by, when he died. Being capable of change and understanding the impact the next generation was making, he absorbed that and wanted to be part of it."

"Whether he would have gone on changing and where this would have led is really the major question. When we started the Sunbury exercise, Robin had seen it as a total design exercise, everything well designed and therefore everything good, as a result of the 'total design' package. By itself 'total design' is not good enough; planning and building has to be a much more internal struggle. The design ideas have to evolve through a profound analysis of basic social, economic and political objectives. Then you'll get the design as an output, rather than as an input. I feel Robin has always thought of design as a major input."