

Working with Robin Boyd in architectural practice

Berenice G. Harris, Dip.Arch. (RMIT), FRAIA, worked for some years prior to 1953 with the office of Frederick Romberg; from 1953-1962 with the office of Grounds, Romberg and Boyd, being appointed an associate of that firm in 1960. From 1962, she has been with Romberg and Boyd Pty. Ltd., and was appointed a director in 1964.

Her working relationship with Robin Boyd extends over some 18 years during which time her duties were mainly production of contract documents (working drawings, specifications, etc.), contract administration and supervision and general administration of the office. One would imagine a close sort of working relationship with Robin Boyd, but this wasn't really the case.

"Working with him was quite impersonal; it was always 'the job' that was important. Personal likes and dislikes did not enter the picture, only what was 'good for the job'. Once weekly, or more often if necessary, informal conferences were held to survey progress of the various projects under way, but not at fixed times as 'his schedules were never cut and dried. Neither were mine and I hope they never will be'."

Quite frequently, she says: "We would all drift together in the drawing office; an impromptu meeting would develop; questions, answers, ideas, opinions and grouches were all aired and would lead to project evaluations, solutions to problems or sometimes a complete re-think of a particular project".

Asked what Robin Boyd was like as a person with whom she worked, Berenice Harris answered: "A gentle person. Humble but certainly not without ego. Never cynical; his wit never cruel. A lonely man in a general sense, he would indulge his dry humour with people he knew well by means of the most crazy, chortley conversations. Not once did I hear him speak badly of anybody or find amusement at another person's expense".

"Just the same, on some things he could be as stubborn as a mule. This usually revolved around some point of detail on one of his buildings; something the draftsman was convinced would not work well but Robin Boyd just as convinced that it just HAD to be that way. We would often drive each other up the wall over such things, but bad humour was never involved."

"Robin Boyd's ability to concentrate explains his amazing capacity for work. His output was phenomenal at times, and was, I suppose, an example we unconsciously tried to follow. The complete concentration he gave to any situation made people feel, in talking over a project or proposal, that it was really worth concentrating on; perhaps more than they had at first thought and so they would intensify their own concentration on the subject."

The partnership of Grounds, Romberg and Boyd is a particularly interesting one because all three were such positive personalities bound by a common obsession with 'the puzzle of architecture'. During the ten years of the Grounds, Romberg and Boyd partnership the practice developed dramatically and so the working relationships changed with it. For the first few years it

was possible for all three to work as a team and this they did very well. Some of the projects undertaken during this period simply cannot be attributed, in the design sense, to any one partner. As the practice grew, so did the pressures. It became physically impossible for the partners to take any major interest in all the projects so each would concentrate on those under his own immediate control.

None of them had specialties. They were all interested in every kind of architectural work. Each job was a new and challenging puzzle to solve. Each job also received the utmost attention and an honesty of approach which would be hard to surpass.

To Robin Boyd, each client was a person presenting a three dimensional puzzle for solution. The person was a most important part of the puzzle—the keystone, the part which had to fit perfectly.

He always sincerely endeavoured to discover a client's requirements during the very first discussions. As people often don't know what they want until they see on paper what they don't want, changes were frequently necessary.

Berenice Harris says: "The role of the architect is to solve three dimensional puzzles: just any solution is not good enough. One must find the 'right' solution, which must answer all the physical and economic requirements, but, most importantly of all, must answer the nebulous question, 'is it right as a whole concept?', which can only really be answered emotionally".

"The architect must then be capable of transmitting the solution to a two dimensional translation in the form of drawings and diagrams which can be easily understood by the builder, who in turn, will put the puzzle together again, this time in solid three dimensional reality."

She believes Robin Boyd's book, 'The Puzzle of Architecture' explains his views on the architect's role and contains a great variety of attempts at perfect puzzle solving. "What keeps us all intrigued, I think, is this chase after the perfect solution; like a golfer always hoping for a hole-in-one."

Boyd was primarily a domestic architect, and wasn't given very many large buildings. The reasons for this, Berenice Harris supposes, are that: "He just wasn't a 'businessman's' architect. Perhaps they thought he was too 'arty', and wouldn't be tough enough. The truth is, he was at least ten years ahead of them and I guess they instinctively shied away from someone who was bound to humanise 'the box'."

"Possibly his greatest source of surprise and chagrin was that people insisted upon clinging to old 'fashions' or conservative notions of planning and construction and stereotyped ideas of 'quality'. However, I cannot remember him being disappointed about anything for very long, as he was a great optimist."

Berenice Harris is currently preparing a collection of Robin Boyd original sketch plans, requested by the La Trobe University and the National Library in Canberra as well. Some of these sketches are included in this issue.