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1-3. Clay House, Environa Studio. 2004. An extendable courtyard house type, that can be grouped with others.  
4. Clay House. Plan showing cluster of houses.

5. Smoke from bushfires outside Perth over northern suburbs. Source: *The Australian*, Thursday, 20 January 2005. Over 500,000 homes on the outskirts of Australian cities are now at serious risk from bush fires.



## Too little, too late? The fatal distractions of 'feel good' architecture.

AUSTRALIANS ARE NOT THE ONLY PEOPLE TO IDEALISE THE DETACHED, single-family house, set on its own, preferably roomy, green plot on the edge of the city. But in Australia, it has long been recognised as a national icon, exceeding in local importance the same residential form in North American culture, so much so that the Australian writer Robin Boyd was famously led to proclaim: "Australia is the small house."<sup>1</sup>

Like Americans, Australians adopted the automobile as their preferred form of transportation long before Europeans, grateful for the freedom of access it gave them to the suburbs and making the 'great Australian dream' come true. However, where American architects had already created their regional models for the type by the early 1900s in the houses of Green and Green and Frank Lloyd Wright, Australian architects have been slower to find their own expression. The Sydney School of the late-fifties and sixties owed much to their American predecessors, as well as to variants of the Australian vernacular, such as the well-shaded and ventilated 'Californian bungalows' seen around New South Wales, whose designs were modelled on the same vernacular architecture across the Pacific. Both American models and vernacular imports were also designed and built in an era when gasoline fuel was still cheap, but air-conditioning was not yet widely available, making natural ventilation a necessity.

When the movement did eventually pick up speed in the seventies and eighties, it did so during a period of growing awareness by planners and

environmentalists, if not all architects, of the negative consequences of low densities of habitation mostly served by private automobiles. Seen in apparent isolation, and – photographed as it invariably is – closely framed in harmony with the immediate landscape in which the house stands, the virtues of the architecture, as celebrated by numerous national and international awards, can hardly be contested. Sensitive to the need for energy conservation within the dwelling itself and skilled in the use of passive techniques of climate control, the leading architects of this regional school – some of whom rarely design anything else – draw upon diverse contemporary and historical sources to produce a uniquely Australian cocktail. Reaching across both the Australian continent and the wider Pacific region, models and critical parallels also stretch far backwards in time, to Aboriginal culture, which admonishes us, we are told, to 'touch-this-earth lightly'.

However, taking a broader view, while accepting these architects' good intentions and lauding their skills and achievements, one wonders whether the limited focus on single houses might be misdirected, if not tardy: a case of too little, too late. We can readily excuse Wright for presenting his Broadacre city project as a dispersed utopia of separate houses on jumbo-sized plots fed by automobiles running along almost empty roads – long before anyone knew about the limited supply of fossil fuels or the effects of their use on global warming. But what can we say about those architects and critics who, directly or indirectly, propagate the same idea in this day



and age, when the devastating consequences of relying on private means of transportation and gobbling up limited supplies of land and fuel, not to mention water, are all too clear?

It is as though those concerned have imposed their own strict boundaries on their mental as well as visual fields of vision, with the crippling result that they only see, much like their photographers, what they want to see: no neighbours, just the house and its immediate setting; no drastic loss of biodiversity, which inevitably accompanies urban expansion of this kind, even with the lowest densities;<sup>2</sup> no thirsty automobiles parked on driveways or inside garages; no lengthy roads connected to freeways; no costly infrastructure of electricity, water and sewage services.

The last burden, it may be argued, can at least be reduced by careful design, using renewable energy sources, recycling water systems and suchlike. Personal habits can also count. A leading Sydney architect of the same movement, proudly pointed out to one interviewer that he reuses half of his bathwater with every next bath. However, the same gushing reporter observed – without comment – that this fastidious person runs a “largish four-wheel drive.” The contradiction of values is apparently lost on the architect, if not the reporter, but it epitomises the blinkered perspective that allows otherwise gifted and sensitive designers to work in such a constricted and ambiguous manner (water and gasoline supplies are clearly not the same thing, but no one can pretend that the former is important while the latter is not).

The same constricted outlook appears to affect domestic architecture in Australia at other levels. Local councils as well as residents staunchly resist any attempt to deviate from the suburban pattern or normative house types and forms.<sup>3</sup> Official architectural visions of future developments are likewise limited to the same basic types and patterns. The *Houses of the Future* exhibition<sup>4</sup> in Sydney last year, for example, confined architects’ entries and innovations to variations on the single-family archetype. The only exception was the Clay house by Environa Studio, a courtyard house type that could be extended or combined with others to form a high-density, low-rise residential development similar to the layouts advocated by Christopher Alexander and Serge Chermayeff in the 1960s.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, while it might be possible to ameliorate the environmental effects and costs of a single house taken in isolation from its larger urban context, it is simply not possible to design out or reduce the number of roads and automobiles that have to be built and maintained to connect all these countless individual homes together, along with all the other multiple destinations of their owners, unless the whole pattern of human settlement is radically altered. Population densities, for a start, would necessarily be greatly increased. More compact forms of housing, including low-rise designs like Environa Studio’s courtyard houses or Harry Seidler’s earlier related projects, as well as high-rise developments, of which there are now plentiful innovative models,<sup>6</sup> could become the norm. Most important, high-density settlement patterns need to be fully integrated with efficient systems of mass transportation. Much of which is increasingly accepted by urban planners, in Sydney and other Australian cities, as well as other parts of the world,<sup>7</sup> but none of which accords with these architects’ values or visions of a suburban or ex-urban utopia.

Reckon in the gas-guzzling and polluting automobiles that are left out of the seductive photos but which make living in the suburbs or on the edge of the city possible, and not even the most sensitively designed house can be truly said to touch the earth ‘lightly’. Multiply the same building

type hundreds of thousands or even millions of times over, all joined up in the usual fashion, and even if each and every one were to be exquisitely crafted and efficiently engineered for the climate – which, to put it mildly, they very rarely are – the combined effect of dispersed houses plus transportation system would still be environmentally disastrous (forget about hydrogen cars or other mobile technological fixes; even if they were to prove viable, which is questionable, there is little likelihood of the automobile industry or their consumers changing over quickly enough or in sufficient numbers to save the day).

Another problem, often glossed over by the architects concerned and ignored by critics, is the obvious difficulty in transposing a design language which originates solely in residential architecture, whether historical or contemporary, to other, more complex building types and urban functions. Time and again, one finds accomplished designers of residential architecture fighting shy of other challenges or else stumbling badly when they do try to step outside their own self-imposed constraints and vocabularies of form and technique (Wright himself never had this problem, and included high-rise architecture in his oeuvre – a lesson forgotten by many of his admirers). What works for one designer’s houses may possibly be stretched to include schools and other relatively small, low-rise buildings, but often cannot cope with the larger, multi-functional buildings required of a modern city. In such cases, it is fair to ask, is the architect only following his or her instincts, or is he or she neglecting other needs and challenges and purposefully restricting projects to those which fit more easily within a favoured repertoire?

What makes committed designers feel good about themselves and their work in the short term, therefore, may only divert them – and their followers – from paying attention to other, more pressing and difficult problems. We should be careful, therefore, to distinguish what may be no more than an illusion of sustainable design – comforting images to make us feel safe and secure and close to nature – from the more complex and demanding requirements of the real thing. This necessarily means treating housing *plus* infrastructure as two sides of the same coin, though the built result may not necessarily look at all ‘natural’.<sup>8</sup> With almost every day now bringing yet another dire forecast of the catastrophic consequences of global warming,<sup>9</sup> it may be time to look for other, less dubious symbols of Australianness.

#### NOTES

1. Quoted in Ivor Indyk, ‘Robin Boyd and the Australian Suburb’, *UIA–International Architect*, Issue No. 4, 1984.
2. Despite their low density, the spread of 35-acre ‘ranchettes’ in Colorado has been attacked for seriously reducing local biodiversity. Amanda Paulson, ‘The new pioneers of sprawl’, *The Christian Science Monitor*, 29 March 2004.
3. Harvey Grennan, ‘Mob Rules’, *Sydney Morning Herald/Domain*, 29 May 2003.
4. Sara Stace (Ed), *Houses of the Future, Year of the Built Environment 2004 NSW Secretariat*, 2004.
5. Serge Chermayeff and Christopher Alexander. *Community and Privacy*. Penguin Books, 1963.
6. For an historical overview, as well as recent innovations, see Chris Abel, *Sky High: Vertical Architecture*, *The Royal Academy of Arts*, 2003.
7. See, for example, Mike Jenks, Elizabeth Burton and Katie Williams (Eds), *The Compact City*, Spon Press, 1996. Also Peter Newman and Jeffrey Kenworthy, *Sustainability and Cities*, Island Press, 1999. The latter includes a chapter on the city of Perth’s successful strategies for overcoming automobile dependence.
8. Many of the most advanced developments in sustainable architecture do not conform to architects’ expectations of what ‘organic’ design should look like. For a discussion, see Chris Abel, ‘Electronic ecologies’, in David Jenkins (Ed). Norman Foster: Works 4, Prestel, 2003.
9. Estimates of the number of years remaining before the so-called threshold or ‘flip-point’ is reached and the process of global warming becomes irreversible, are now put as low as ‘less than 10 years’, threatening life on Earth itself. Patrick Wintour and Paul Morenko, ‘Global warming near point of no return’, *The Guardian Weekly*, January 28–February 3, 2005.

7 & 8. Group Housing, Yarralumla. Harry Seidler, 1984. One of many early experiments by the architect with clustered housing.

6. Irwin House, Pasadena, California, USA. Green and Green, 1906. Source: *Author*. The architects combined local materials and features with Japanese influences.



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