



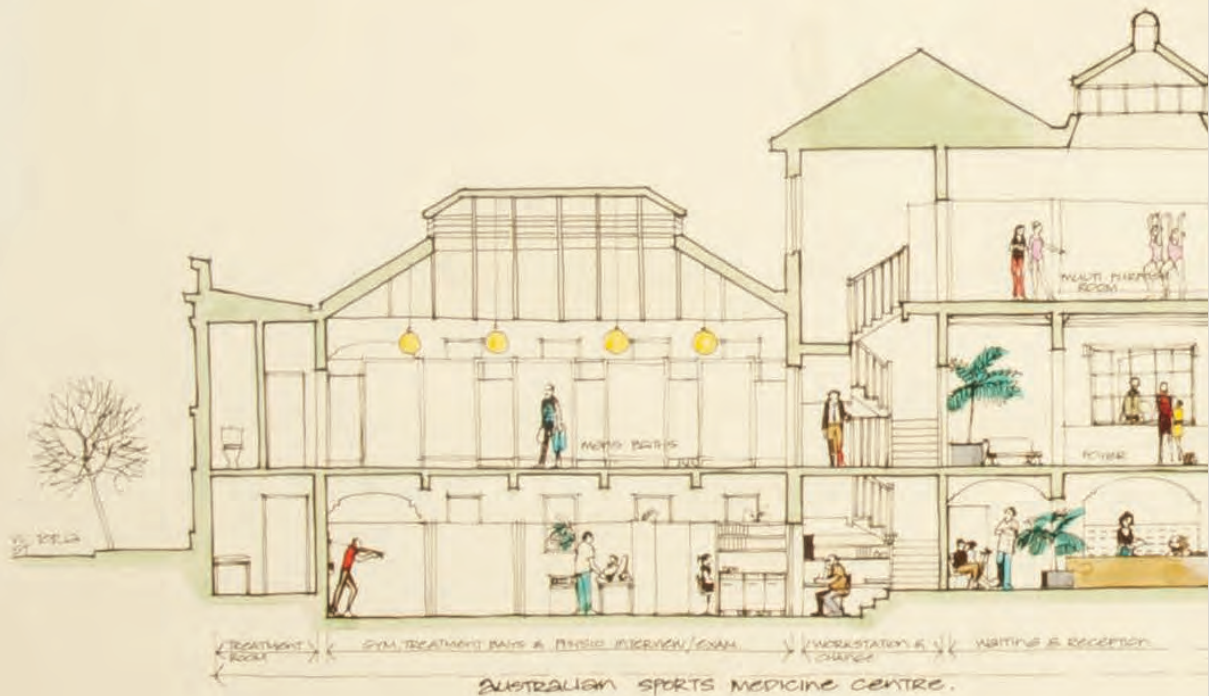
**RMIT
DESIGN
ARCHIVES
JOURNAL**

VOL 14 Nº 2 | 2024

GRAEME GUNN



SWANSTON ST. ELEVATION
MELBOURNE CITY BATHS



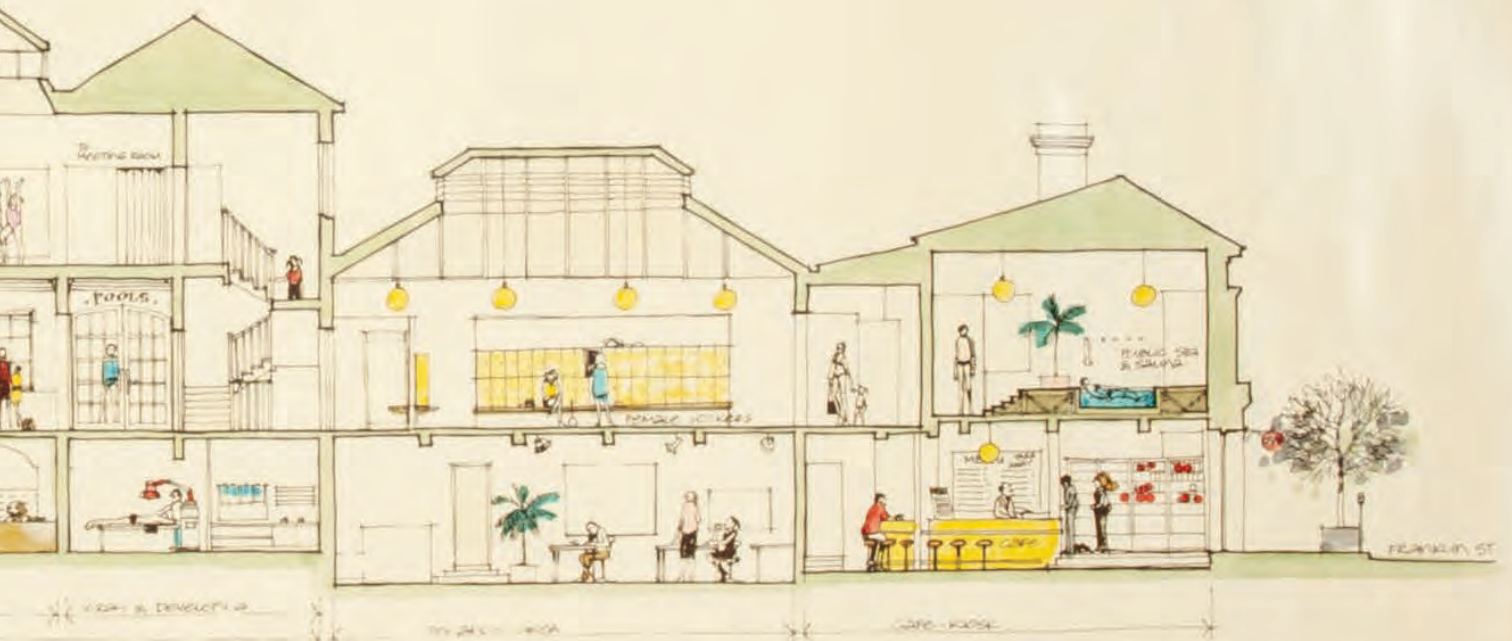
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AUSTRALIAN SPORTS MEDICINE CENTRE.

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RMIT DESIGN ARCHIVES JOURNAL

VOL 14 Nº2 | 2024

GRAEME GUNN



City Baths Melbourne
Renovation & Additions

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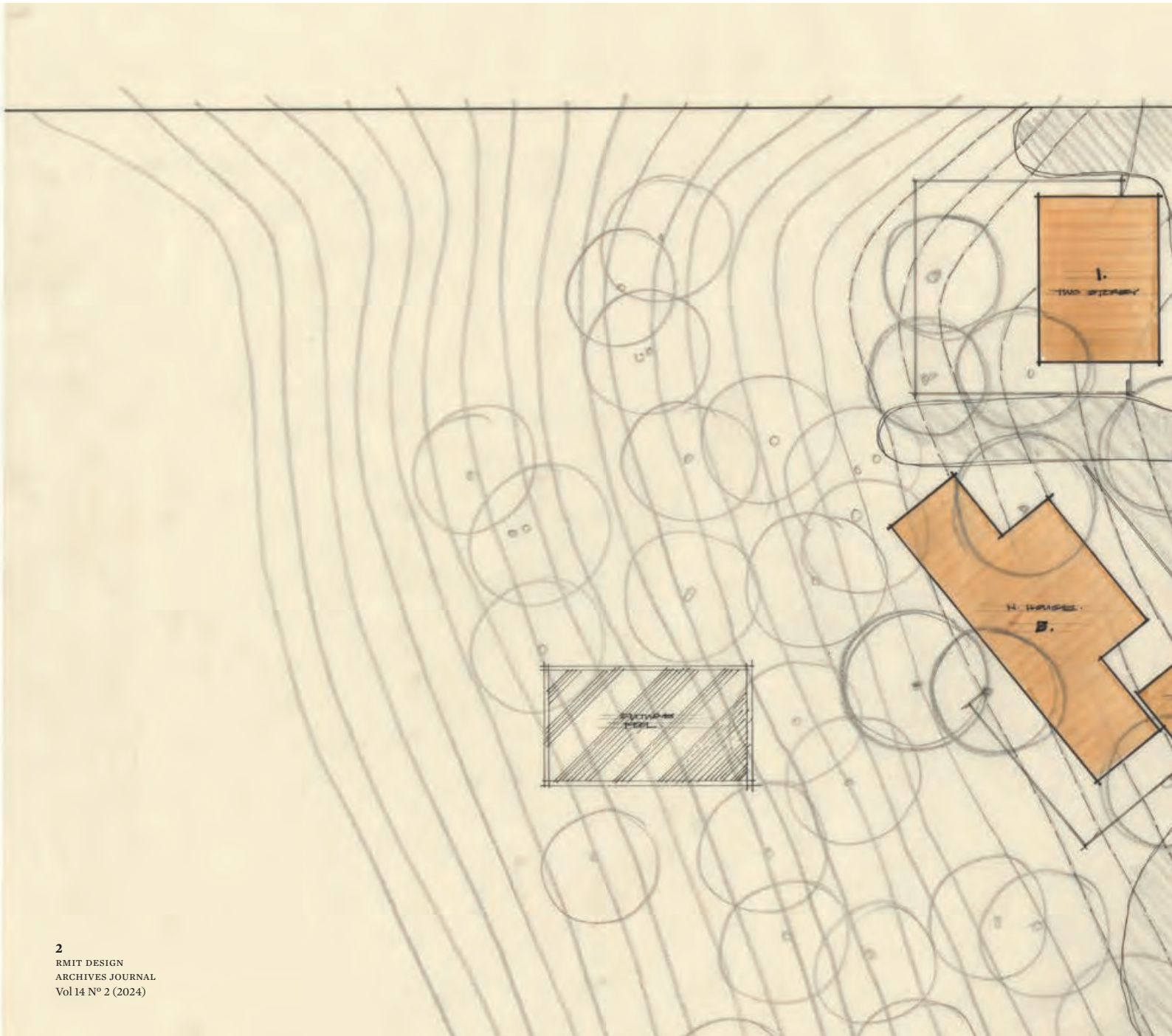
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We acknowledge the people of the eastern Kulin Nations on whose unceded lands we conduct our business and we respectfully acknowledge their Ancestors and Elders, past and present.

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Photograph of collage given to Graeme Gunn on his departure from RMIT, 1982 (detail). Source *Architecture Australia*, March/April, 2011, 83

Inside Front Cover

Schematic Design City Baths Melbourne – Renovations and Additions, 1980, architects Kevin Greenhatch, Argroup Pty Ltd, Gift of Graeme Gunn 2018.

Below

Doncaster development working site map, 1970, architect Graeme Gunn, client Merchant Builders. Gift of Graeme Gunn. © 2024 Estate of Graeme Gunn.

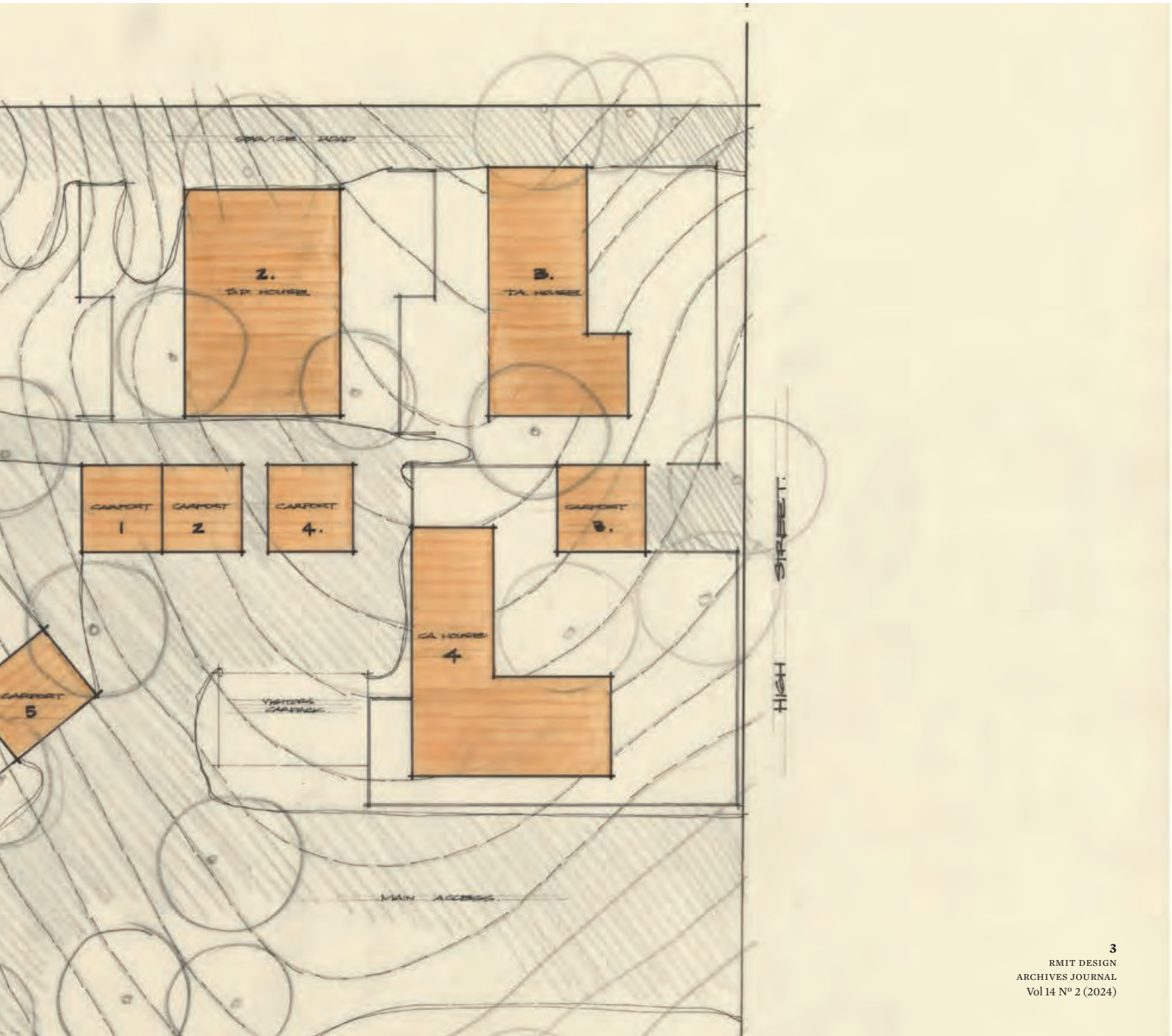
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Graeme Gunn's death occurred as this journal was nearing completion. We extend our heartfelt condolences to his family, friends, and numerous colleagues. His loss lends deeper significance to this issue, and although it offers only a glimpse into his remarkable legacy, we hope it inspires further investigation into Gunn's work and a broader appreciation of his lasting impact on Australian architecture. We thank Alan Pert for the obituary included within this issue. Pert had the privilege of spending many hours with Gunn over the last few years, and we are grateful for his expansive contribution to this issue.

We extend this gratitude to all the contributors whose combined efforts have led to a richer understanding of Gunn's lasting impact.

This issue raises the question of an architect's legacy. Graeme Gunn is widely recognised for his work with the Merchant Builders, especially his design for Winter Park (1969–1981), along with his design of the Plumbers and Gasfitters Union Building (1968–1970). Yet, as we explore in this issue, Gunn's influence reaches far beyond a few notable built works. Buildings are inevitably demolished or altered — consider the Griffins' Cafe Australia, Edmond & Corrigan's Ringwood Library or Roy Grounds' National Gallery of Victoria — but what often remains unchanged are the stories, reflections, and cultural shifts that architects leave behind. For Gunn, these elements converge around a profound sense of community, relationships, and collaboration — what he has described as the “greater whole.” More than the structures themselves, it is these enduring relationships and the collaborations that defined Gunn's career and that we aim to emphasize.

It takes a person of great spirit and generosity to move with grace through the fair of Victoria's architectural scene, as Gunn did. We invited the contributors of this issue to not simply focus on Gunn's built works, though these remain important, but also to shine a light on the many collaborations and roles Gunn undertook throughout his career. Gunn became a leading force in architectural education and as an architect who shared his wisdom through the many collaborations he forged. What becomes evident is that, as both an architect and educator, Gunn was a facilitator of change, through a variety of roles. Once the desired change was realised, Gunn would usually step aside, allowing the next generation to carry it forward. This approach has led to what often seems like a gradual recognition by the profession.

This issue of the *Design Archive Journal* contains contributions from Gunn's peers, collaborators and early researchers of his work. We use these terms deliberately, for at each stage of his career Gunn has supported others in following their interests. Judith Trimble and Anne Gartner were among the earliest to write about Gunn's architecture, covering his time at Grounds Romberg and Boyd, his initial solo projects, and his later work with Merchant Builders. In this issue, both scholars revisit their previously unpublished research, offering valuable context for the materials found in the archive.

Ian McDougall recounts his time as a student and later graduate tutor at RMIT University under the deanship of Gunn, when Gunn spearheaded new radical pedagogies of architectural education. Karl Fender's contribution captures a similar time in Gunn's career, instead told from the perspective of architectural practice. These recollections attest to Gunn's sustained philosophy, one that wasn't so much interested in the outcome but instead reflected his sheer enthusiasm for discovery. When combined, these accounts of Gunn's teaching and design, describe the two sides of Gunn during this period; remarkably, Gunn's gentle but persuasive sense of humour marks both.

In 2008, architect Sophie Dyring established a practice with Gunn, having only graduated several years earlier. For this issue, Stuart Harrison and Sophie Dyring returned to Winter Park, a development by Merchant Builders

designed by Gunn, to discuss Gunn's ongoing influence for younger generations of practicing architects. Gunn's generosity marks a second interview published here, from 2011 with then recent graduates in architecture, Kate Finning and Tom Muratore. Gunn was matter-of-fact and frank, deferring to others' contributions over his own. It reveals a selfless way of practicing architecture, one more concerned with existing relationships, both for the buildings and the roles he has undertaken across his career.

Finally, Alan Pert writes on the influence of landscape — specifically the granite formations found in the Grampians, close to where Gunn grew up — and parallels this with Gunn's design for the Plumbers and Gasfitters Union Building, a building that also re-interprets, in some detail, the terrace typology in the streetscape. Pert goes on to situate the shift in Gunn's design thinking in the earlier townhouse projects. Drawing on Trimble's earlier writing, Pert goes on to situate the shift in Gunn's design thinking, describing them as sculptural experiments in collective form. Gunn describes this way of designing as a ... “process of ongoing relationships existing in a physical context.” This desire to actively listen to and observe the surrounding context is evident in Gunn's buildings and urban forms but also in Gunn's way of practicing and teaching. Returning to the Plumbers and Gasfitters Union Building, we see the final ‘closed’ form as a contribution to the larger whole, to the streetscape itself, constructing a projecting counterpoint to the recessed terrace forms adjacent to it.

As editors of this issues, we have also included a selection of material sourced from the RDA to highlight the breadth of Gunn's contribution to design and education in Victoria. These include architectural drawings, reviews of Gunn's work by Norman Day, exhibitions Gunn participated in and other ad-hoc material which sit alongside the authors' contributions.

The material contained within the Archives, in part reproduced here, testifies to Gunn's many collaborations. Across the catalogue of his designs, it is difficult to identify a house style. Instead, there are several intense stages of architectural expression, often championed by or associated with a young architect in Gunn's office. The interviews and recollections in this issue speak across this material, drawing it out for a broader audience. Graeme Gunn's career has all manner of connections to history, connections to varied people and connections to varied places. We hope this issue will form a part of a larger body of research and recognition. As Alan Pert remarks at the end of his essay, this research remains incomplete — a taste, almost.

There is so much we can learn from Gunn: how to practice, mentor and support others; how to engage with and see the profession of architecture; how design can observe and respond to its existing environment; the role that landscape can have in urban and precinct design; landscape as a metaphor, a reference; how to see your work and way of working as part of a greater contribution, a greater history and community of practice.

GUEST EDITORS

Conrad Hamann, Christine Phillips and Thomas Muratore

The Graeme Gunn I Knew

Ian McDougall

When Graeme Gunn was appointed Head of Architecture and Building at RMIT in 1972, he was 39 years old. He got the job when he had just completed the iconic Plumbers and Gasfitters Union Building, picked up a rare 1971 RAI A Victoria award (of three winners it was the only building that year) and had begun working on the groundbreaking Winter Park project. He had no training as an educator and by the way had never finished his academic course.

Opposite

Media Clipping titled "Scope opens up for students," *The Age*, January 21, 1978, author Norman Day. Gift of Edmond & Corrigan 2017. © 2024 Norman Day.

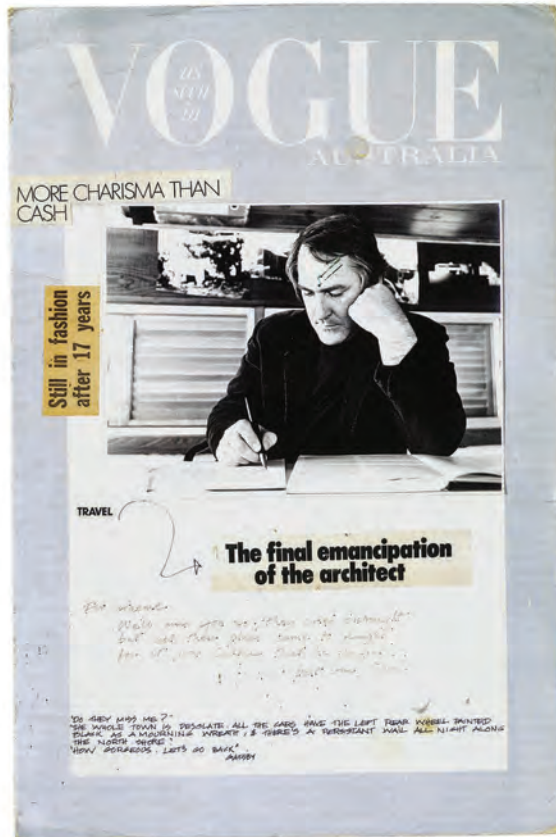
Photograph of collage given to Graeme Gunn on his departure from RMIT. Source *Architecture Australia*, March/April, 2011, 83.

My early 'contact' of who Graeme was happened via the grapevine, in 1975, while a student at Adelaide University —I began to hear about the radicalised architecture course at RMIT. When a difference of opinion with my Dean led to advice that it was unlikely I would graduate from the then narrow and conservative course at the school, I needed to consider my future. The argument was over issues of pedagogy, environmental and community consciousness, in short, the stuff of the 1970s student awakening. My friend Richard Munday and I pondered leaving our beloved home state to study elsewhere —RMIT looked very interesting.

Move we did and in 1976 I fronted up at 200 La Trobe Street to see if they would let me in, and at what year level, since I had completed four of the five years of the degree back home. Surprisingly, I was invited to meet the Head to discuss my suitability. Such an unlikely meeting of a 24-year-old rabble-rouser with the charming and somewhat enigmatic architect/educator. I had been dealing with the haughty, opinionated Adelaide Dean, but Graeme was so different—open minded, progressive, disarming and very friendly. He left a great impression on me then that remains to this day — that of an incisive and deeply intelligent person, a listener, and a doer. I was allowed into the course to complete my degree.

It is hard to describe today what it was like to jump from Adelaide's British-esque engineering-and-building-science orientated course, ordered around lectures and exams, into

RMIT's free-wheeling program of electives and 'disciplines' focused on community interaction, social activism and self-assessment. Graeme's school was welcoming and liberal but also invigorating. There was a hippy drop-in cafe in the main building called Woody's! Staff were a 'resource.' They were 'guides'—specialists assisting in the gaining of knowledge of self, of community and of architecture. The program that Graeme had nurtured set out to radicalise the way architects thought and acted. Studio leaders ranged from hippy DIY designers like Randal May, activist/architects such as Ann Rado and Doug Evans, delineator extraordinaire Jason Pickford, arcane design methodologists Peter Downton and Greg Missingham, and more. There were some lectures—planning and professional practice—at 200 La Trobe, but the rest of our time was spent in the hot house of the Gossard building in Franklin Street.¹ The old factory building of Gossard was set up with places to draw, teaching nooks, kitchenettes and conversation pits, none of which would meet regulations. Indeed, the various levels were made using building scaffolding. It was due to Graeme's vision that the place existed as it did. It was Graeme who nurtured the numerous research centres integrated as resources for students and community into the School: CERES at Brunswick, the Environmental Resource Exchange Centre, the Centre for Applied Ergonomics, the Practice Group (a working office doing jobs by staff and students). Graeme's modus was that of the architect's studio, collaborative and encouraging, rather than the constraining hierarchy of a government department. It was Graeme who



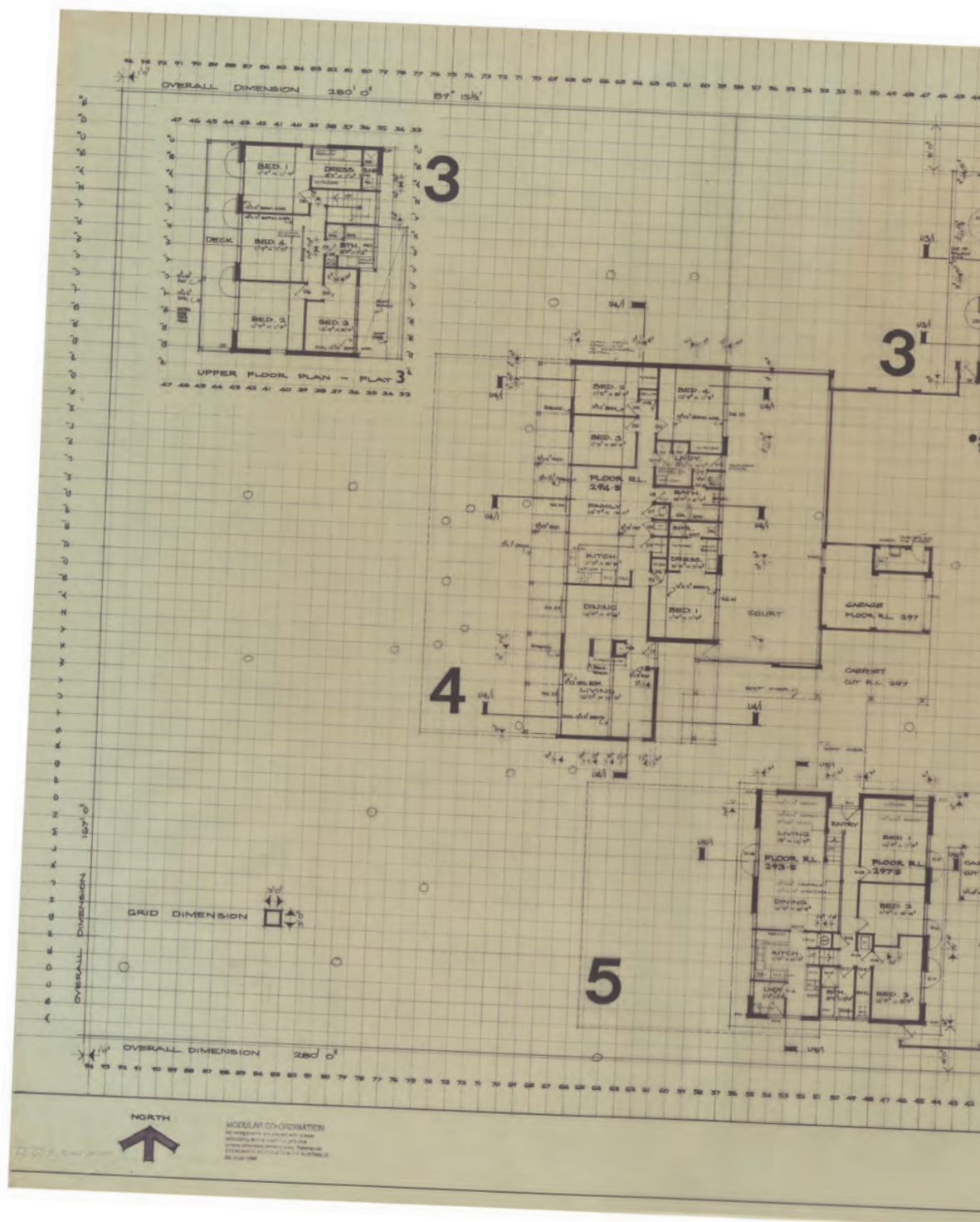
brought Peter Corrigan into the School in 1975—the other reason Richard and I had chosen RMIT. As well as his design studios, Peter gave traditional lectures on history, design, theatre, literature, and football, whatever he considered crucial to an architect's mind. This was aligned with Graeme's open curriculum, encouraging architects to broaden their cultural perception. Graeme inherited the night-school structure, but he enriched it with a parade of part-time practitioner tutors: Peter Crone, Peter Elliott, Howard Raggatt, David Mayes, Ross Ramus, Norman Day, Suzanne Dance, Tony Styant-Brown among many. This pedagogical model remained for years and continues.

In 1979 Richard and I began working to produce *Transition* magazine.² Graeme was a supporting advocate from day one and a key sponsor of its establishment. His belief and respect for the publication set the foundation for the relationship with RMIT that would pass on to later Deans, ensuring the magazine's long life. As a well-placed friend of the magazine, he helped us to interview the starchitects who were visiting Melbourne as part of the Architecture International Series of the 1980s.

We worked with him when he was a trusted advisor to the Docklands Authority (later VicUrban) through the 1990–2000s. He was the most important expert of the design panel review process that marshalled some quality early designs—reviewing that was done under difficult conditions.

Friendliness, directness and openness are the enduring characteristics of the times I have spent with Graeme—and good fun. I have never experienced him pulling the uber-self-centred maestro, that tiresome characteristic of the sometime powerful. I have a long and enduring respect for him, and I was always inspired by some shared aspects of our lives. We both came from the country. We both admire the autodidact. His natural insight and his dedication to architecture, especially its significance to the community (another shared value), produced remarkable impacts on our architectural culture. His worth as an expert advising government was long overlooked. Indeed, I was so annoyed at the Institute's failure to recognise Graeme's significance that as State President, I presented him with the President's Award for Lifetime Contribution. His impact was finally acknowledged when he was made the Australian Institute of Architects (AIA) Gold Medalist in 2011. A man of charm with a dry and slightly devilish wit. At one RMIT soiree in the early 1980s, I was standing with Howard Raggatt and Peter Corrigan. Graeme asked us to rearrange the order in which we were standing, closest and furthest from him in a line of three. Peter first, Howard second, me third. Then he rearranged us, Howard first, me second, Peter third. We asked what he was doing. He answered with his cheeky smile, "trying to organise you in order of intelligence" and laughed. We laughed too.

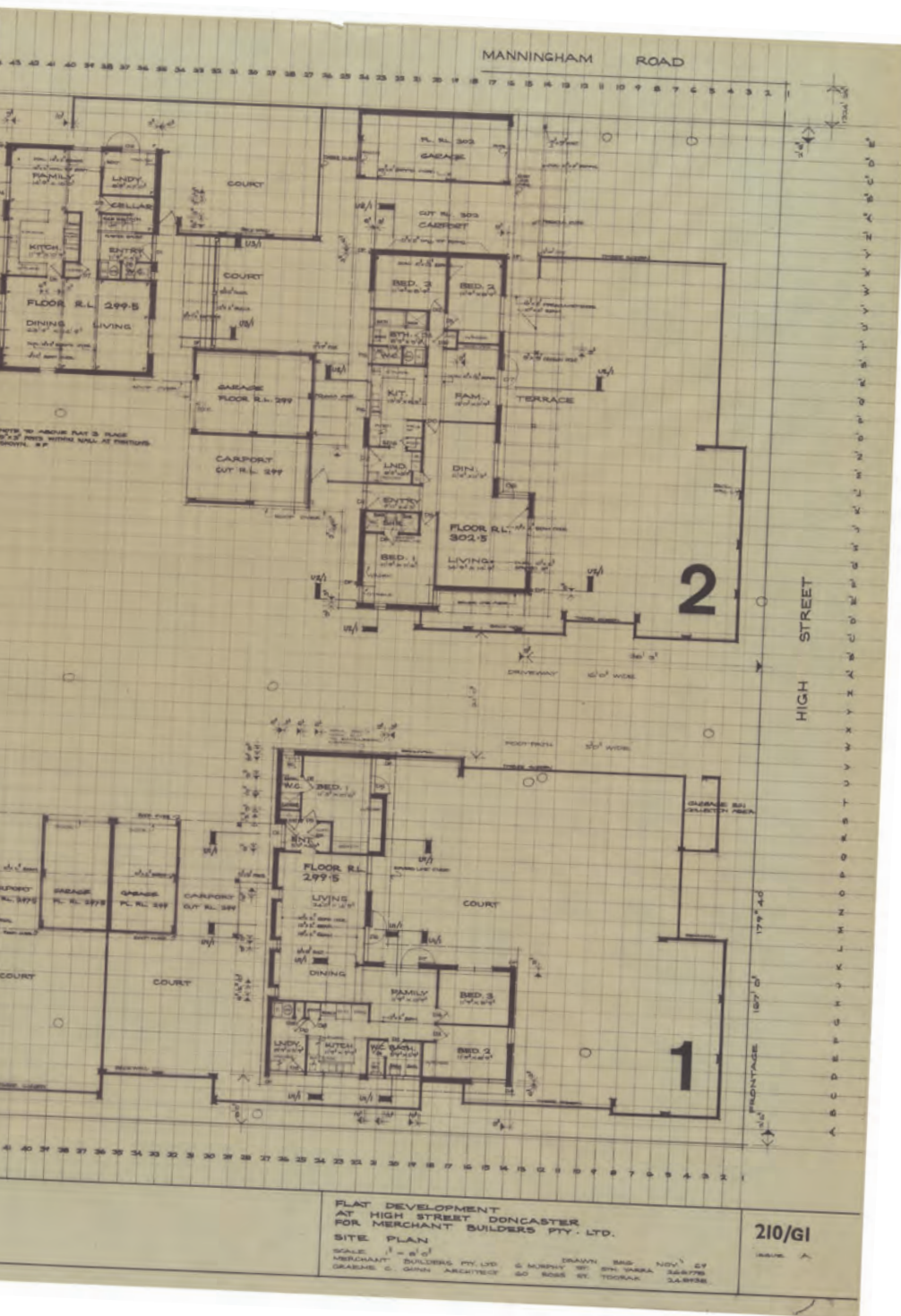
1. Building 49, RMIT University, Franklin Street, Melbourne.
2. *Transition* was a magazine published in Melbourne, Victoria from 1979 to 2000. Regular contributors to the journal were also part of the community associated with the Halftime Club. For a further history on the journal and the club, see Mark Sawyer, "A cloud of things | A network of texts: Form, content, politics, and meaning in Australian architectural periodical," (PhD diss., The University of Western Australia, Perth, 2017).



Interview with Graeme Gunn

Kate Finning and Tom Muratore

As recent graduates, we found Doug Evans' text 'The Changing of the Guard' a moment of great clarification.¹ Evans detailed a shift in Melbourne's architecture in the late 1970s, away from a regional-modernist approach, represented by Kevin Borland, and towards the post-modern, represented by RMIT. The outcome of these events shaped our education and the city in which we hoped to practise.



Opposite
 Site plan for flats at
 Winter Park, High Street,
 Doncaster, November
 1969, architect Gunn,
 Graeme Cecil, client
 Merchant Builders,
 Gift of Graeme Gunn.
 © 2024 Estate of Graeme
 Gunn.

Although not mentioned by Evans, we thought that Graeme Gunn's role as the Head of School at RMIT during this time may have contributed to these changes. The following text is an excerpt from an interview with Graeme Gunn conducted on three separate occasions over two months in 2016. The conversations took place in Gunn's office on level 1 of a red brick courtyard building at 402 Smith Street, Collingwood.

**Kate Finning and
Tom Muratore
(KF&TM)**

**Graeme Gunn
(GG)**

KF&TM: How did your involvement with RMIT begin?

GG: I had been a member of the Council at the Institute [Royal Australian Institute of Architects] for about three years. Robin Boyd had come in as the Victorian President, along with Peter McIntyre and Reg Grouse. They weren't managing the profession for their own interest but wanted to encourage architecture in the general public through more exposure. They were young architects who had yet to complete any major buildings in Melbourne. The Head of School at RMIT had just died, and people kept asking what was going to be done about it. The salary was £12,000 and nobody wanted to take it up.²

By 1972, I'd been in private practice for around 10 years, and we had twelve staff. Len Hayball was my partner at the office and very capable of running things. I just said to him 'I think I'll take this up if I can'.³ It took RMIT a long time to say yes because I had no qualifications. I did have a reputation in the profession though, and no one else took it up, so they didn't have many options.

KF&TM: Did you have a gripe with RMIT at the time?

GG: Oh yeah, I did. Specifically because, in the time since I'd been a student, the same teachers were still there and I thought it was so wrong for the students to have this moribund body.

KF&TM: So the teachers had no stance?

GG: There was no real movement. It was seen that RMIT produced good draughtsmen, good fodder for the old practices. For them to be thinking in a lateral way about architecture and to start investing something in Australia's intellectual future was beyond the pale. I thought it needed titillating.

It was about two major issues. Firstly, I knew we didn't have the staff or financial resources. We also had a terrible old office building at 124 La Trobe Street, Melbourne. It was also about creating a democratic environment for both students and staff. We wanted to get them involved in thinking about their own future and how they could redirect the School.

The focus became how to get people to learn rather than just teaching them things. Before this I had travelled overseas to well-known educational institutions. In Illinois, where Mies van der Rohe had been the stalwart of the thesis year, students had to produce a building in Mies' vocabulary. I thought that was so wrong.

There were also student revolutions all over the place; they were burning Paul Rudolph's building at Yale and rioting in France. When I was interviewed at RMIT one of the questions they asked me was 'what would you do if the students rioted?' I said, 'I hope to have better communication with them'. Once I got the role I went away with the students and staff for three days to look at a new direction for the School. I knew we didn't have enough teaching staff, so everybody had to learn how to be self-sufficient and create their own destiny if you like. It was a

very funny and fulfilling period. As I said, it's nothing you would plan, it just developed out of its own energy.

KF&TM: What types of students were emerging? Did these changes attract a different type of teacher or student?

GG: They were really spinning off each other. We did things like start a coffee shop for students and staff which became the EREC [Environmental Resource Exchange Centre]. Then we got a librarian who taught students how to do research. All of this happened without regulatory overlays; we decided what we wanted to do and just did it. We also cut down on permanent staff because it was my feeling that people would rot if they remained in jobs for too long, which is probably a factor of both the person and the institution. To address this we had contract positions of five-year terms until the Union stopped us. Soon after, many young people wanted to become a part of the faculty which was very exciting. The other consideration was environmental matters. In particular, Man's intervention in the environment and that was the 'Man-Environment' program which became the basis of the architecture course.

KF&TM: And then there was a reaction against that as well.

GG: Yes there was, there had to be.

KF&TM: Which tended towards a more philosophical and art-based practice?

GG: Yes, it happened after the first five years.

KF&TM: And you start to see Edmond & Corrigan, ARM [Ashton Raggatt McDougall], and Wood Marsh's influence. Was there an emphasis on teaching spatial intelligence?

GG: As the Head of School and later the Dean, I was more interested in changing the educational process.⁴ Later there were people like Alex Selenitsch, Greg Missingham and Peter Corrigan who came on as teachers. I'm not sure spatial intelligence is something you can teach, but I'm not a teacher. Some people are natural teachers like Jim Sinatra, who we got from Iowa [State University] to start the landscape course.

KF&TM: We'd like to talk more about your residential work. In particular, we're interested in how social relations play out through the plan. For example, you made a point of dividing parents and children.

GG: Yes, but I wasn't as conscious of it as you seem to point out. The nature of families, their structure, and a particular client's brief are my primary motivation. I am not aware of any attempt to direct clients to think that zoning of families was necessary for functionality, or sanity. The question does raise the matter of flexibility and adaptability as essential ingredients to the effectiveness of residential design. Even when projecting a family's requirements, they would vary greatly between the needs of very young children and teenage children. The measure of a good house design is its ability to satisfy the needs of all inhabitants at all times.

New Bachelor of Architecture Course at RMIT

Aims and objectives

1. To help prepare men and women for the profession of architecture, who become dedicated to contributing to their community, and who are capable of providing services of an excellence that will both inspire and affect positively the members of that community.
2. To see to develop new knowledge and skills that will add to the vitality of the profession and the ordered development of the society it serves.
3. To provide an atmosphere and opportunity for the intellectual and practical development of the School, as a co-operative whole.
4. To foster a learning environment which allows the individual time and space to comprehend the meaning of his own growth so as to reveal some conception of the totality of which architecture is an integral part.
5. To provide a dynamic curriculum which can respond to and assimilate change, while continuing to recognise the basic needs of people.
6. To make this School an integral and contributing part of the intellectual community.
7. To identify, analyse and serve a broad and continually defined social purpose.
8. To require ethical responsibility and leadership in the future ordering of the elements that comprise the physical environment.
9. To encourage a public definition for the architectural profession whereby the architect represents a "skilful and compassionate agent of change."
10. To encourage the student to practise his profession with skill.

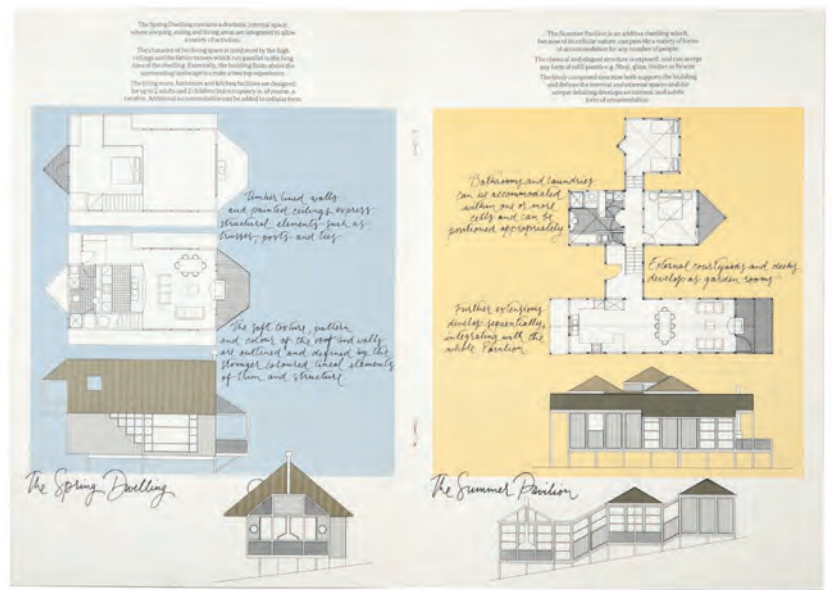
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Above
Bromide of advertisement
for “The Houses,
BY GUNN.” c. 1993,
graphic designer Bruce
Weatherhead, architect
Graeme Gunn, builder
Bower House Pty Ltd.
Gift of Georgia
Weatherhead. © 2024
Georgia Weatherhead.

Below
Brochure for Merchant
Builders, 1988, graphic
designer Bruce
Weatherhead, architect
Graeme Gunn. Gift of
Georgia Weatherhead.
© 2024 Georgia
Weatherhead and
Graeme Gunn.

Opposite
Booklet titled
The Houses, by Gunn.
c. 1992, designer,
Bruce Weatherhead,
architect, Graeme Gunn,
Bower House Pty Ltd,
Gift of Georgia
Weatherhead.
© 2024 Georgia
Weatherhead and
Estate of Graeme Gunn.



KF&TM: How does this manifest in the project?

GG: Well, there are a number of ways to address this issue. For example, some one-off houses that are heavily capitalised and based on a specific brief generally tend to be more deterministic in their planning, form, and materiality and, as a consequence, less capable of adaptation. Whereas repetitive or volume-built housing based on assumption planning ought to be more capable of adapting to changing needs.

KF&TM: Were your ideas of internal planning based in part on your own experience?

GG: Yes, certainly the open plan. We had bought a small weatherboard house in Toorak, which we covered in brick. The interior was an old, segregated space so we opened it up. I liked the way people came into the house and could move around freely. You would talk around the kitchen, and it became a point of focus while we were cooking.

KF&TM: So, even if you weren't conscious of it, opening up the kitchen was in itself a move away from the norm.

GG: Yes.

KF&TM: But you didn't think of it that way?

GG: Well, Robin Boyd's house had already done this. The Merchant Builders houses had a family room as well as the main living and dining space, so the kitchen became a spatial divider making it the central focus. We also positioned the main bedroom and ensuite at the entry, serving as a protective device for children. The ensuite could also be used as the guest toilet so it had to be close to the entry and living room. You didn't want guests going into the kids' bathroom, which was a bloody mess anyway. The Merchant Builders plans now seem tiny. They were confined by economics. The aim was to minimise the peripheral walls, so we started off with a box and then hoped they had some charm.

KF&TM: Were all of the Merchant Builders' houses based on the same module?

GG: Yes. It started off as a 900mm or three-foot unit. In the office we later had a drawing process where we had a metre by metre grid on a sheet. The standard house was then drawn up on that sheet, and we would just dimension off the grid, all you did was count your squares.

We tried to get local building surveyors to use it too, but they said it didn't work for them, so we had to put the dimensions on all the drawings.



ENDNOTES

- 1 Doug Evans, 'The changing of the guard: the social and cultural reflections of community in the 1970s Melbourne architecture', *Fabrications*, Vol. 15 (1), 39–53.
- 2 Denys McDonnell, Head of School 1968–1972. Peter Wilson held the position until Gunn's appointment in 1972.
- 3 Gunn Hayball practised from 1972–1982.
- 4 Gunn was Head of the Department of Architecture and Building and became Dean of the Faculty of Architecture and Building in 1978.
- 5 Aims and Objectives of the new Bachelor of Architecture course at RMIT, from Submission to the Victorian Institute of Colleges by RMIT, 1974. Source: Judith Trimble, *Graeme C Gunn, A Critical Art History*. (phD diss. Monash University, 1985), 376.
- 6 Bower House Pty Ltd, formed in 1992.

KF&TM: Was planning with a grid something you had done previously?

GG: No, the grid came in with the Merchant Builders' Terrace House.

KF&TM: Efficiency.

GG: Yes, definitely. In the Bower Houses we used a volumetric grid.⁶ We built about twelve of them. It was the most formalised grid I ever did. Previous houses were a bit – quite wrongly – more ad-hoc, so they didn't have the consistency of construction that this one had.

KF&TM: At the same time, while you do want this system in place, you don't want it to feel as though you're walking into a grid.

GG: I don't think you get that sense. I just see it as a tool. The transference of a grid into the courtyard frame of the Bower Houses is perhaps a very overt clue that a grid is involved, but you don't see that translated in the interior spaces.

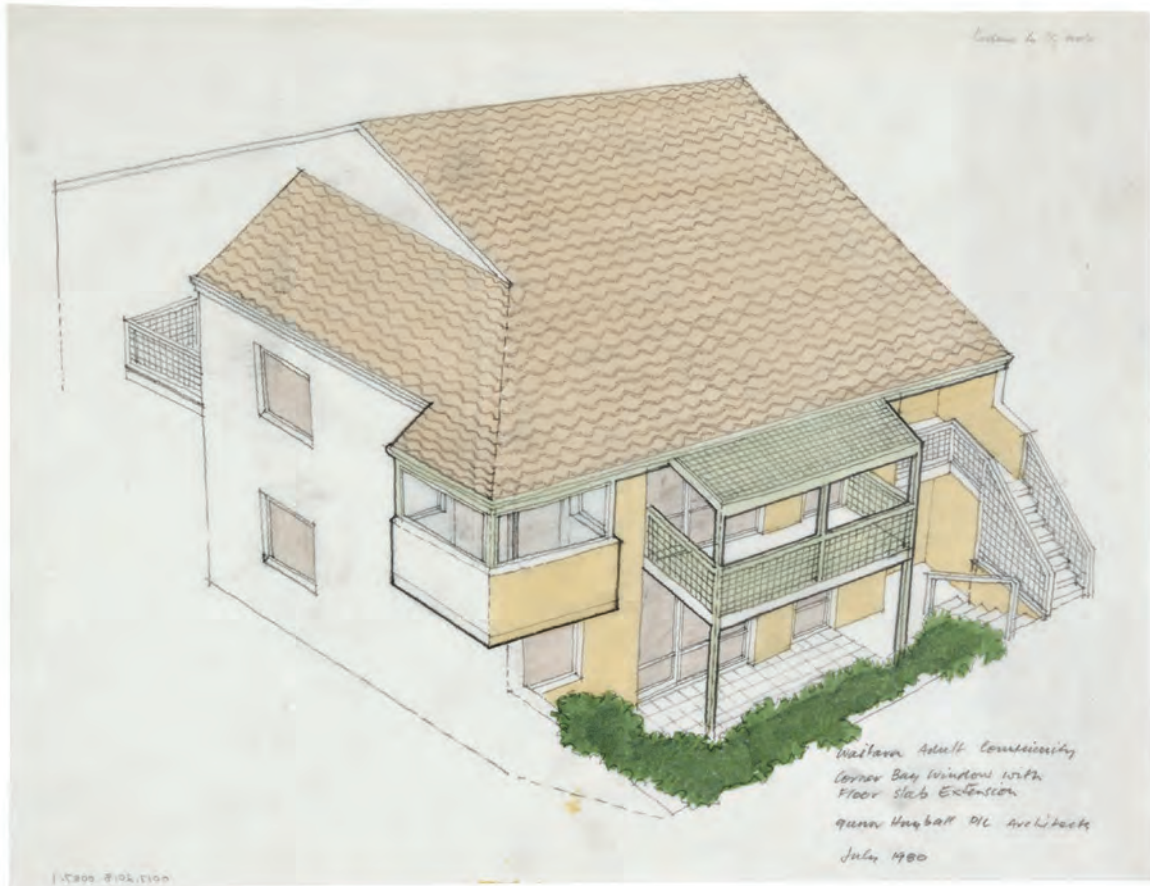
KF&TM: Do you see a consistency in your approach to housing and your role at RMIT?

GG: I guess I'm interested in the potential of an individual or group to be creative in their own development as distinct from imposing unproductive, institutional methodologies upon them. In architecture it is a focus on social structures and the power of place as the inspirational keys. The basis for architecture is to consider the needs of people and how they might live, work, and recreate. This is distinct from my own desire to be recognised.

This approach to life and living, a philosophy if you like, was applied to what I perceived to be the major problems with the whole of RMIT. It was to inject new life and new ideas by releasing students and staff from the shackles of institutionalised education and behaviour. It was like opening the floodgates to unbelievable opportunities. The place became a centre of design, social interaction, and intellectual exchange, all with an element of environmental consciousness.

KF&TM: Thank you for answering all of our questions.

GG: No no, it's very good of you. Normally I'd be paying for this from some marketing consultant.



Working with Gunn

Karl Fender OAM

Over many years of architectural practice, Graeme Gunn modestly made a rich contribution to architectural thinking in Australia. His selfless dedication to architectural teaching reform while at RMIT, first as Head of the Department of Architecture and Building, and then as Foundation Dean of the new Faculty of Architecture during the 70s and early 80s, greatly enhanced student education by creating broader areas of knowledge and higher respect for the environment. His work with Merchant Builders in particular is recognised for bringing new typologies and quality to landed residential living and his oeuvre of commissioned work over the years produced a unique collection of meaningful design responses to place. The various evolutions of his practice have always been places of creative enquiry for clients and colleagues alike, and I feel privileged to have been one of the beneficiaries. The awarding of his Australian Institute of Architects Gold Medal in 2011 and the Order of Australia in 2012 are testimony to Graeme's profound contribution to the practice of architecture.

The first encounter

My first job commenced in 1968 as a student in the office of Romberg and Boyd. With two years of a drafting course under my belt and blissfully happy with my fortune to be there, I was naively ignorant about the consuming world of architectural practice that was about to envelope me. I was certainly unaware that a youngish architect by the name of Graeme Gunn who had preceded me in the office when it was Grounds Romberg and Boyd, would have such a profound influence on my architectural journey in the relatively near years to follow.

Robin Boyd passed away in late 1971 about four years after I joined his practice. At that moment of time as Romberg and Boyd wound down, the thought of having to work in another office was untenable, so I started to practice solo as a designer of private residences. Still quite inexperienced, I would from time to time, seek construction detailing advice from Bill Williams, an ex-colleague and mentor of mine in the Romberg and Boyd office. His generous advice was always accompanied by a strong call to join him where he worked at a wonderful, small practice located in Lamin Lane, Toorak. After initial resistance, I finally agreed and joined the practice of Gunn Hayball in 1973.

This was at a formative moment for that practice.

It followed in the path of a well-documented period during which Graeme had a strong singular architect/client connection to the progressive Merchant Builders group. With vision, Graeme realised that he needed to take the practice in a different direction to avoid the risk of being a one client architect, and the onboarding of Len Hayball in 1970 was an important step toward achieving that.

The completion of the Plumbers and Gasfitters Union Building (1968) provided a breakthrough for him and projects like Royal South Yarra Lawn Tennis Club (1969), Prahran Market (1971-1981), and the AMWU (1971) which followed started providing the necessary diversity he was seeking. His strategy was successful. He was expanding, and I got a job.

While at Romberg and Boyd, I was mentored to become a competent documenter, and the role in Gunn Hayball was based on this. In fact, as it turned out I never produced any construction documentation. There was an immediate design bond between Graeme and I which was underpinned by like-minded defining architectural principles, and so I designed.

Opposite

Drawings for Waitara Adult Community, 1981, architects Gunn Hayball Pty. Ltd. Gift of Graeme Gunn. © 2024 Len Hayball and Estate of Graeme Gunn.

This office was a special place. Len Hayball in his role as the Managing Partner was erudite, knowledgeable, and charming. He provided perfect counterpoint to Graeme who was an inspired designer, remarkable in his parallel role at RMIT and a highly respected Melbourne personality. Clients felt at home coming into the studio and leaning over desks to enjoy the transparency and grass roots involvement in the evolution of their project. The studio comprised about twenty staff, all young and driven. The environment shared an intoxicating blend of serious design pursuits with collegiate social togetherness. It felt like a connected family. It provided a staff restaurant in a small terrace house next door, and on hot days we enjoyed Len's pool in his house nearby. Friday nights closed out a hard week's work with spirited conversation over office drinks often followed by late nights in favourite local restaurants with some of Melbourne's great characters ... people like Nobby Seymour, the trompe l'oeil artist and the enigmatic architect Bernie Joyce, come to mind.

Top
 Perspective for The Grange, Waitara Retirement Village, New South Wales, 1981, architects Gunn Hayball Pty. Ltd. Gift of Graeme Gunn. © 2024 Len Hayball and Estate of Graeme Gunn.

Middle
 Drawing of west elevation of Portland Aerodrome, 1980, architects Gunn Hayball Pty. Ltd. Gift of Graeme Gunn. © 2024 Len Hayball and Estate of Graeme Gunn and Len Hayball.

Bottom
 Photographs of Portland Aerodrome, 1980, architects Gunn Hayball Pty. Ltd, photographer, John Gollings. Courtesy Karl Fender and John Gollings. © 2024 John Gollings.

The projects in the office comprised a diverse potpourri of residential typologies, commercial office interiors, boutique retail interiors, restaurants, regional art and community centres, and master planning. Two of the interesting projects I worked on with Graeme included the replanning of the public areas within Leon Fink's Southern Cross Hotel and also with Len, as well, the Golden Square/Kangaroo Flat Community Health Centre near Bendigo. Graeme, operating at a high level with his beautiful design sketches, focused on planning clarity, expressive built form, the creation of memorable spatial experiences and sensitive placemaking. I was struck by the apparent ease at which his architectural ideas flowed. Len in his usual sanguine way offered a knowledgeable, reassuring professional presence to our team and to clients.

After the void I found myself in from the sudden passing of Robin Boyd, I once again felt inspired and privileged to be in his vibrant studio, and so after one year and on a Friday night in 1974, when Len and Graeme offered me a formal leadership role in the practice, with surprise and elation, I accepted.

However, after a weekend of weighty deliberations and with very mixed emotions on the following Monday, I resigned.

My wife and I harboured a passionate desire to travel and live abroad. She was six months pregnant, and we had a four-year-old son. It dawned on us that by accepting Len and Graeme's generous offer the kind of travel experience we sought would not be realized. Two weeks later we left for London.

... and then, Gunn Williams Fender

In 1980, after five years of travel which included bringing our second son into the world while living and working in London, followed by life in Rome and then in Cambridge Massachusetts where I completed the Master of Architecture Degree at Harvard University, my family and I returned to Melbourne, and I reconnected with Gunn Hayball.



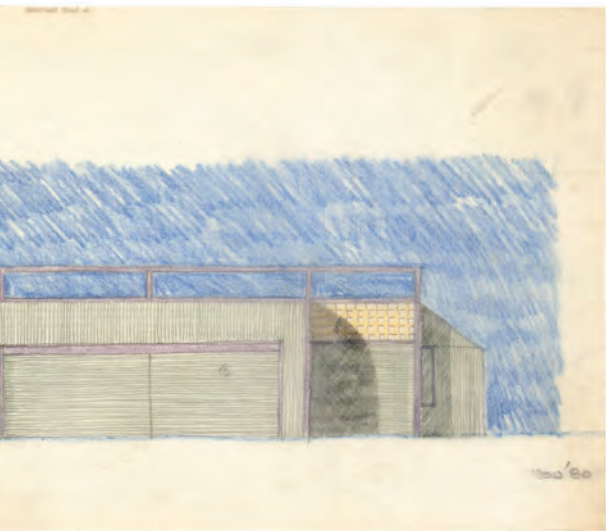


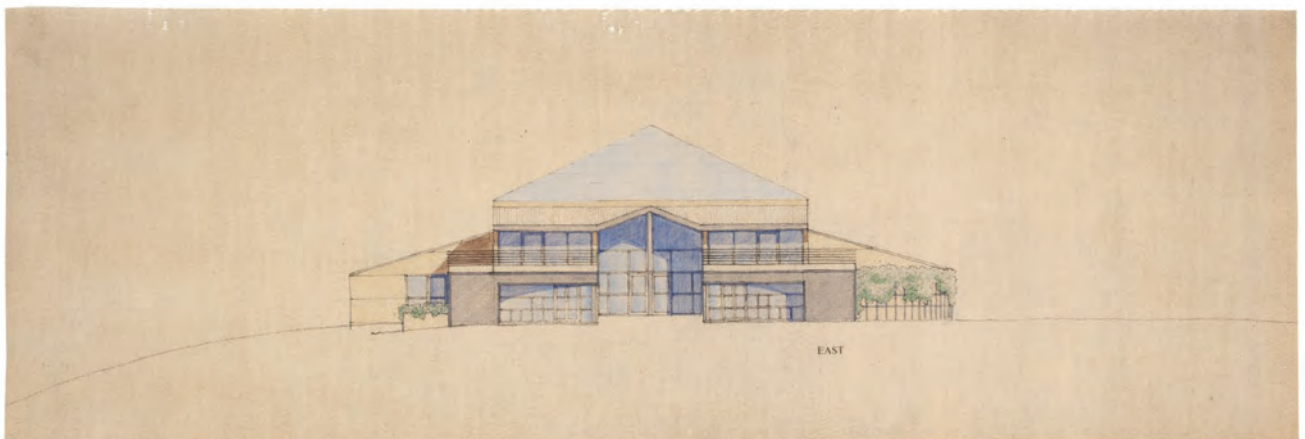
The practice was at that time located in a converted warehouse in Shelley Street, Richmond, with Graeme still mostly consumed by his RMIT Deanship responsibilities. The practice had retained the esprit de corps that I fondly remembered from the Lamin Lane era, with Len and Graeme still reigning charismatically. The projects were many and varied and as an adjunct activity, they were undertaking their own private development projects such as Millswyn in South Yarra the innovative repurposing of the Maples Warehouse into quality residential apartment living. That project commenced with the purchase in 1979 of the property as a syndication of Len and Graeme, joined by Grazia Gunn, Alison (Jean) Miller, Ross Ramus, and Andrew Reed. At the time, it was an extremely brave commercial move, one which at that scale represented quite a courageous program and risk for architects to tackle. As a result, and by challenging existing building regulations, the team was able to accomplish a benchmark of adaptive reuse while providing each of them with a unique inner-city apartment. This was clearly an architectural office driven by energy, initiative, and tenacity which seemed to thrive on parallel agendas beyond the bounds of standard practice.

My first assignment on return was to design the Central Facility building of the Waitara Adult Community project for Lend Lease in North Sydney which Gunn Hayball with Steve Calhoun of Tract Landscape Architects had won in a limited competition. This was a major project for the office which it approached with serious commitment. To facilitate design development, we created a local 'pop-up' office in an apartment near McMahons Point which Graeme, Steve Calhoun, Suzy Boyd, Bill Williams, and I initially worked from. Later during construction our 'design squadron' re-based on the building site. Again, the overriding spirit was fueled by design commitment, close teamwork and a sense of adventure, with Graeme fully hands on through the entire process.

My time designing with Graeme was often after hours in the Melbourne office when he returned daily from RMIT. I found our meetings inspiring and admire the way he managed so fluently to develop further levels of richness and meaning into the designs. Concurrently with general practice, Graeme and Len were plotting the purchase of The Salvation Army Citadel building located on Victoria Parade, East Melbourne in a development partnership with John Scroggie, a services engineer, and Andrew Reed, an architect. Fuelled by the knowledge gained in the successful development of Millswyn, the group recognised the adaptive refurbishment potential of this large, antiquated heritage building, as a new form of workplace for the consortium partners. Again, all went well with this optimistic program; the building was purchased, conversion was completed and with excitement, the Gunn Hayball team moved into their wonderful new premises. Days later however, catastrophe struck over the weekend when a major fire destroyed most of the building.

It was fortunate indeed that the practice could immediately relocate temporarily into Len's large unfinished apartment shell in the Millswyn development. This fire was of course





an enormously upsetting setback for the practice, but with exceptional tenacity, the practice regrouped, continued project delivery with apparent seamlessness and designed a new office in an untouched ex-printing works area of the Salvation Army building complex. Although the personal strain of this episode on Len and Graeme and their development partners must have been enormous, it was bravely concealed, and in late 1982, the practice moved with optimism into its new premises at 502 Albert Street, East Melbourne.

Early into this new chapter, Len left the practice to create Hayball Leonard Stent which today still operates as the highly respected Hayball architectural firm, and Gunn Williams Fender was then created. Graeme continued in his role as the prominent design face of the practice, Bill Williams nurtured projects through design development with the skill and sensitivities he first developed at Romberg and Boyd and I worked design with Graeme who by now had completed his tenure at RMIT and was more than ready to fully re-engage in the creation of built environments. I like to think that each of our early formative years spent individually in the office of Romberg and Boyd had created a cultural unity. We were certainly like minds and the ease of making the formal business union was not surprising. Our new practice comprised a number of senior project architects who led the usual complement of experienced architects, graduates, and students. It was a new era but the compelling personality of the business that Len and Graeme had created carried on.

Graeme always designed without a predetermined style, and while brilliant in his own right, he was also a generous collaborator during the creative search for relevant design. Excellent outcomes were more important to him than sole authorship. He did not force design premeditations but rather searched for fundamental design generators from within the brief, from the clues or demands of the physical context and from those around him. His work is highly influenced by the land he grew up in around Hamilton. The sculptural rock formations of the Grampians, the plains, the tree forms, grasses, rolling hills, light, shade, shadow, and the farm buildings all fused to create the indelible imaged reference library of his architectural consciousness.

His paintings and drawings were all by-products of his continued search for appropriate built environments which uplift the human condition. As an advocate for higher density urbanism, I was always firmly reminded by Graeme in our many conversations to never forget or dismiss the importance of satisfying the human need for natural landscape. Working through many projects together, I witnessed first-hand how much he was affected and influenced by a deep respect for location, context, and nature.

We designed many buildings together. On reflection, I'm struck by the diversity of building typologies we were involved in and by my consistent joy at where the scribbles on the blank page landed us. The diversity of his architectural manipulations in various surprising built form outcomes was always uniquely derived from

an unwavering adherence to his design principles. The pragmatics of function and constructability were always front of mind, and the search to capture spirit of place was always profound. Portland Aerodrome masterplan for instance referenced Australian rural landscape patterns as viewed from the air. The Moonee Ponds Market extension humorously presented external walls as social statements by sculptural referencing of suburban homes along its Everage Street façade. A translucent Teflon coated fibreglass roof over a central courtyard within the Besen family home in the Yarra Valley created an internal sculpture garden which in turn vested the large house with intimate yet appropriately separated family zones. The Melbourne City Baths extensions (with Kevin Greenhatch) and Perry House at Geelong Grammar both created similarly restrained and respectful architectural responses to their heritage contexts. Graeme did not regard restraint to be a cause of lost opportunity for architectural relevance.

As a business partner, albeit with a somewhat naïve disinterest in anything other than design, I found Graeme's similar attitude to the commercial aspects of running an office was more than compensated for by his design prowess, and unchallengeable public charisma. We enjoyed the privilege of projects landing at our door and ignored the need for any form of marketing, and so as the economy soured in the eighties, not surprisingly, our work like many other firms, started to dry up. In order to relieve the mounting financial pressure on the practice, I suggested that I could take leave of absence with the idea of going back to Italy to work for a while and somewhat optimistically find European connected work for the practice.

I made it as far as Hong Kong where I settled. Two years later in 1986, by then well ensconced in Asia, I resigned once again. When Bill also departed a short time later to form Bill Williams architects, Gunn Williams Fender became Graeme Gunn Architects.

Like many others who have associated with Graeme, I am grateful in retrospect for his sage advice and the inspiration I felt from the clarity of thinking behind his often contrary, but always relevant, insightful views. It was certainly a privilege to be in the partnered company of such an expansive architectural mind and presence, and a honour to be a friend.

Opposite Top
Perspective of Besen House, Tarrawarra, 1983, architects Gunn Williams Fender Pty. Ltd., renderer, Peter Edgeley. Gift of Graeme Gunn. © 2024 Bill Williams, Karl Fender, and Estate of Graeme Gunn.

Opposite Bottom
Diazotype of east elevation of Besen House, Tarrawarra, 1983, Gunn Williams Fender Pty. Ltd. Gift of Graeme Gunn. © 2024 Bill Williams, Karl Fender, and Estate of Graeme Gunn.



Graeme Gunn: Architecture and the Human Spirit, Early Houses 1960s and 1970s

Judith Trimble





Graeme Gunn: Architecture and the Human Spirit, Early Houses 1960s and 1970s.

Judith Trimble¹

Graeme Gunn was one of Australia's most awarded architects. His quest has been for a meaningful architecture to sustain the human spirit, seeking integrity and wholeness through imaginative, empathetic, and artful design, not adherence to specific styles. His new humanism—lying in a modern sense and unrelated to the Renaissance sense of a studios rebirth of antiquity, was closely associated with University of Sydney academic, George Molnar. Molnar made a contemporary call for authenticity in Australian architecture.² Gunn's approach would build upon modern movement principles of functionalism, truth to materials and technology, while accommodating new attitudes in Australia to less formal styles of living, and to living with Australia's natural environment, all with potential for new architectures. Beginning with housing during the 1960s and 1970s, principles established early in his working life have continued to inform Gunn's practice in every field. Key achievements in his early domestic architecture, from his varied early houses to multiple density housing, the Cluster Code, and loft conversion, provided a series of new living and planning opportunities.

Beginnings

Gunn's design principles drew on youthful experiences. Born in 1933, he was one of five boys whose family had been builders in Victoria's Western District for several generations. He began to learn materials' properties and construction early with his brothers in their father's building yard. Childhood games played in gutters and grassy lanes and links between and behind Hamilton's verandah-fronted shops along the contrasting wide streets, monumental public buildings, even subtly changing light across grass bending in a breeze, instilled those values of form and space, scale, context, and environmental sensitivities essential to the richness of precinct, heritage, 'place' and belonging. Gunn still had these potent memories forty years later.³

In 1956, having worked with his father for six years building conventional houses, Gunn sought more stimulating opportunities in Melbourne. He began by enrolling in the Royal Melbourne Technical College (now RMIT University) Fellowship Diploma to study architecture, while also spending two years in architect Linton Bailey's office, becoming skilled in drafting.⁴

A chance meeting in 1959 with architect, Peter Muller, whose famous Whale Beach house north of Sydney integrated the natural environment with Wright's Usonian Natural House principles, was inspirational for Gunn. In Muller and in Robin Boyd's writings on Australian architecture, Gunn found kindred spirits. He found the *Architectural Review* and *Architecture and Arts* were also encouraging, illustrating avant-garde designs. Then when an opportunity to join leading Melbourne architects, Grounds Romberg and Boyd (GRB) presented in 1960, Gunn joined the firm.

There he worked closely with Robin Boyd, whose approach was to find structural solutions to design problems, using new materials and adventurous technology to create vigorous new forms. His approach greatly appealed to Gunn.⁵ Presentations and discussions in the GRB office included Wright's organic architecture and traditional Japanese architecture. Boyd's monograph, *Kenzo Tange*, was published in 1962. Several Melbourne architects had also broken the conservative mould with radical designs during the 1950s. All these influences inspired new ways forward.

Previous Page

Winter Park, Doncaster (1971–1981), 2021, photographer John Gollings. Courtesy Melbourne School of Design. © 2024 John Gollings.

Opposite

Molesworth Street Town Houses, Kew, 1968, architect Graeme Gunn, photographer Kurt Veld. Courtesy John Gollings. © 2024 Estate of Kurt Veld.

Continued

The Early Houses for Melbourne Suburbs

Shoebridge House 1961

Gunn's first commission, while still working at GRB, was one of several houses that established his reputation for fully resolved, site sensitive, individual designs.

The Shoebridge house was for a two-third acre site in Doncaster on the edge of a mature pine forest, the land falling gently toward the north frontage and the view. Gunn designed a 24.4-metre-long brown timber building to echo the idea of a fallen tree laying across the site, its shape and colour blending with the forest. This was more Scandinavian than Australian bush ethos in accordance with its specific setting. The elevated façade illustrated the architect's developed familiarity with timber and his ability to integrate structural systems with aesthetic expression. Overwhelming horizontality was emphasised by consistently continuous details, while smaller verandah posts articulated a regular, modular pattern across the façade. Recalling Boyd's penchant for innovative technology, Gunn used scissor truss construction to support the long, shallow V-shaped elevated underfloor, carrying the oil heating duct. Vertical timber infill bays beneath the handrail across the central façade also reflected the Scandinavian affinity, repeated by interior timber wall linings.

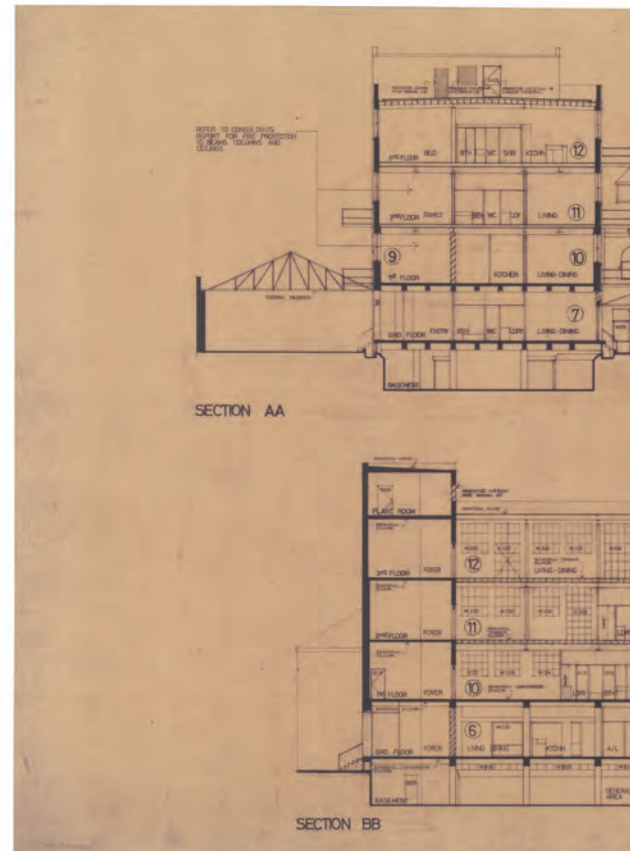
The interior also drew upon distinctly Japanese influences, the trabeated modular design emphasised by exposed structural timbers. Ceilings were lightweight panels of unpainted caneite, an inexpensive material used for some time by Roy Grounds, Robin Boyd and Sydney Anchor. Sliding panels, including bamboo screens, allowed flexible use of open-planned space. The Shoebridge house was illustrated in *Architecture in Australia* in 1963,⁶ and immediately drew new clients.

Dawson Grove House, 1962

In 1962, Gunn left GRB to begin solo practice, with one new commission, the single-bedroom Dawson-Grove house—this was despite 1961's credit squeeze, which depressed the home building industry. Circular and polygonal designs populated journals in the 1950s and early 1960s. Inspired by Boyd's creative form-making, especially the circular Tower Hill Lake Reserve Museum Gunn had worked on the year before, and following Grounds' prominent round Henty House (1953) nearby, Gunn's small Dawson-Grove house in Frankston was near-circular. Its heptagonal roof, supported by radial beams skewed from its offset lantern reached beyond the circular brick perimeter wall. No two beams were the same length. Secondary rooms were divided segmentally around the perimeter wall, off an open annular space surrounding the open central, sunken, circular living area. A large segment was left open to the sunlit terrace beyond. Landscape designer, Ellis Stones, whom Gunn had met at GRB, worked with him on a holistic concept for the entire site. The construction area nestled into the site's contours: earth excavation, terrace, house, carport, and driveway served a singularly consistent, curvilinear concept. It was to be Gunn's only circular design.

Richardson House, 1963

The contrasting Richardson house was for a flat site in suburban Essendon in Melbourne's inner north. It answered the clients' singular request for complete privacy from their too-familiar street: a Federation style precinct of red brick bungalows with elaborate terracotta tiled, high pitched roofs, and decorative timber valences, standing in spacious leafy gardens. Gunn's alternative was a rectangular, single-storey atrium plan absorbing the entire site, excepting a narrow side boundary driveway and spacious rear pool



terrace. External walls of grey concrete block, with tall narrow windows at wide intervals, and a "flat" metal roof turned down over the walls presented a notably defensive façade. Mrs Richardson noted that neighbours were very confused, but the client was delighted. Its tectonic weight and opacity from outside had affinities with Louis Kahn's architecture in the USA and South Asia, then gaining prominence.

Reflecting ancient atria houses, and Boyd's own house, planning for privacy was also attracting other innovative architects. The Richardson house's internal gallery and perimeter rooms surrounded the expansive atrium.

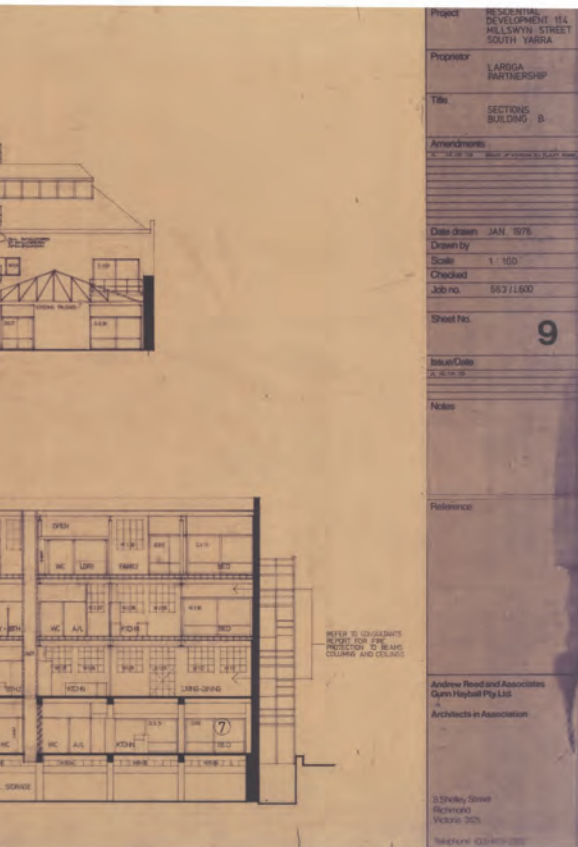
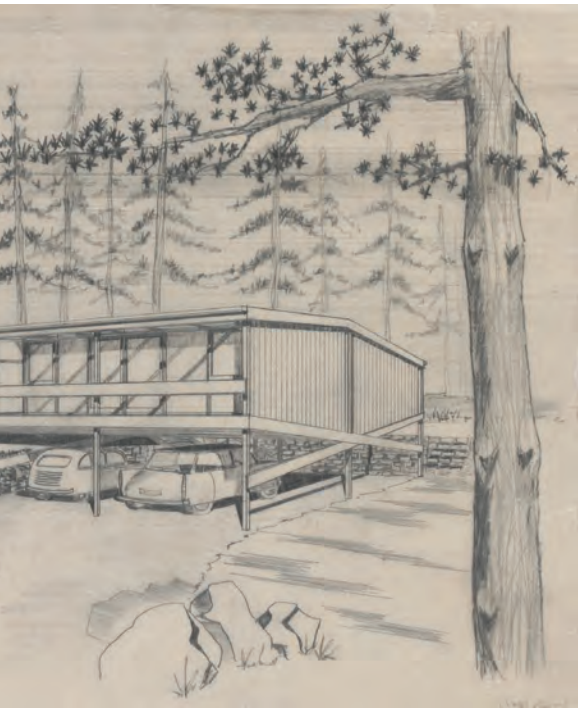
Top Left
Perspective of house for R.M. & E.R. Shoebridge, Woodhouse Road, Doncaster East, 1961, architect Graeme Gunn. Courtesy of Melbourne School of Design. Collection State Library of Victoria. Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program 2009. © 2024 Estate of Graeme Gunn.

Bottom Left
Sections for residential development, 114 Millswyn Street, South Yarra, 1978–1979, architects Gunn Hayball Pty. Ltd., Andrew Reed and Associates. Gift of Graeme Gunn. RMIT Design Archives. © 2024 Estates of Graeme Gunn and Andrew Reed.

Right Top
Shoebridge House, Doncaster, 1961, architect Graeme Gunn, photographer Peter Wille, 1963. State Library of Victoria.

Right Middle
Interior perspective for Richardson House, Essendon, c. 1963–1964, architect Graeme Gunn. Gift of Graeme Gunn. © 2024 Estate of Graeme Gunn.

Right Bottom
Exterior of house Mr. L. H. Richardson, Essendon, 1964, architect Graeme Gunn, photographer unknown. Courtesy Melbourne School of Design.



The north-facing, sun-controlled living room overlooked the large pool terrace. A substantial pergola, supporting a deciduous vine, simultaneously provided seasonally controlled light, additional privacy, and assured human scale under a limitless sky. The Richardson house won the RAIA (Vic) Bronze Medal in 1966 for the best design completed in Victoria that year.

In 1965 Graeme married elegant and cultured Grazia. Born in Cairo of Greek and Italian parents, she had spent her first fifteen years in multi-lingual, multi-cultural and privileged society. This society became a diaspora after Abdul Nasser's advent, and Grazia's family arrived in Australia in 1952.

Grazia studied at Melbourne's National Gallery Art School under the celebrated painter, John Brack, before working in interior design.⁷ Her design sensibility would influence Gunn's changing palette over the following years.

Merchant Builders

Project houses

1965 also began a prolific period in Gunn's career, when David Yencken and John Ridge formed the Merchant Builders company,⁸ and became Gunn's major patron-client during his early period. Yencken was a visionary young planner, and Ridge was Director of the Boston Timber Company. Together they sought new concepts for suburban

housing, in the wake of contemporary project houses by Ken Woolley, Don Gazzard and others in Sydney,⁹ through Pettit & Sevitt in particular. Merchant Builders purchased a bush site on a rise in Melbourne's suburban Glen Waverley for a project-house display centre. Gunn designed their Studio, Courtyard and Terrace project houses, and Ellis Stones shaped the sensitive landscaping with native planting, enhancing the site's natural environment. Their display centre opened in 1965 and was an obvious departure from the conformity of standard, conservative offerings: houses in manicured settings on level, clear-felled sites, each site surrounded by paling fences, where concrete driveways proudly exhibited the family car.¹⁰

Merchant Builders houses were of brown brick, brown stained timber detailing, which aimed to blend with the natural environment. Interiors were white with timber-lined ceilings. Open planned living areas were flooded with light through extensive glazing, shaded in summer by timber pergolas. They were set among established eucalypts with Ellis Stones' subtle and modulated landscaping of emerging rocks, native violets, and leaf litter.

Stepping into such an environment was memorable and, at the same time, shocking and enticing. The exposed timber detailing unfortunately proved too costly for many young enthusiasts. Merchant Builders' houses were instead popular with emerging middle-class professionals interested in a new informal lifestyle, encouraged by direct outdoor access into a native garden. Each house was intended as a package to be built on clients' land with Ellis Stones' landscaping. Inasmuch, Yencken, Gunn and Stones were more than tastemakers. They distinctly challenged traditional house forms, encouraging more relaxed living in natural and clearly Australian surrounds, answering Boyd's "higher quality of living ...[as] ... an expression of the human spirit."¹¹

New clients for both Gunn and Merchant Builders soon multiplied. From 1966 through 1968, Gunn accepted commissions for seven new houses, two blocks of apartments, six new project houses, six projects for multi-unit townhouses, and his first re-use conversions. He also designed the *béton brut* Plumbers and Gasfitters Union Headquarters. All were built. Other commissions reached design completion.

This was also the early period of the Elliston project for Merchant Builders, and when large, complex houses were being increasingly designed for suburban sites. Gunn's Rockman house (1967) in Walsh Street, South Yarra, raised solid walls to the street, while its complex plan, incorporating the sloping land on several levels, allowing both spacious rooms and a variety of smaller functional spaces, including a photographic studio, and a swimming pool. Exterior dark bricks left exposed inside, created cave-like spaces, relieved by the large, central living room addressing a courtyard garden.

In 1968 both the Dobyn house and Yencken's Baronda were significant among these early houses. Both exploit the diagonal and were otherwise freed from property boundaries and earlier pure geometric forms. Like the Shoebridge house, the Dobyn house at Donvale, in Melbourne's east, occupied a large, wooded site descending towards the frontage. Here, external walls of Daniel Robertson grey clinker bricks and dark stained timber detailing blended with surrounding forest colours and textures.

Set well back on the site among pine trees, the house stepped up the slope, rising to a high, split gable: two prominent skillions, one with a larger sweeping roof

plane running forward, parallel to the gradient. This was a sophisticated interpretation of the ubiquitous 'lean-to' roof. Each skillion addressed the other across a wide gap accommodating the dormitory passage below. Both inner wall planes were glazed.

Following his earlier projects exploring linked pavilions,¹² a spacious billiard room built above the large carport was linked to the house via a long roofed and paved walkway. Separated pavilions, the roofed walkway, and staggered design incorporating large and small courts and steps between different levels reduced mass and allowed forest views while moving from different levels both inside and outside the house.¹³ The interior was planned on four levels beneath the skillions, every room having a forest view. The study, built on its own level in the top of the higher skillion, answered Gunn's determination on first seeing the site, to "have a room in the tree-tops."¹⁴ It was also, arguably, affected by Robin Boyd's recurrent stepped planning, and Ken Woolley's spectacular house (1963) in Mosman, Sydney.

Baronda 1968

David Yencken's celebrated holiday house, Baronda, was built on a 30-hectare property at Nelson's Inlet NSW intended as part of a larger scheme.¹⁵ Here was an opportunity for a *whole* house in the tree-tops, merging visually with eucalypts and old-growth ferns. Situated on a level site above a low cliff, overlooking the inlet, it was to have been a simple shelter elevated for the view and to avoid sand flies. However, Gunn produced a much more elaborate design for a radical, indestructible structure built of raw timbers round a pole frame and without internal walls, doors, or window glazing. This excited Yencken, though local council regulations demanded the windows be glazed.

Yencken had, in 1961, commissioned the Black Dolphin Motel¹⁶ at Merimbula in the same region. As there, stripped tree trunks were used for Baronda's structural framework. At the core of Baronda's multi-level construction rose a huge chimney. Surrounding it, the sturdy timber poles bolted together created a modular grid supporting floors, like platforms, accessible from the stair at intermediary levels. Floors doubled as ceilings for the rooms below. This linkage, and other projects such as the Chelsworth Park Pavilion, Ivanhoe (1974), paralleled new houses by the American architect Charles Moore, as with his Sea Ranch Condominium in Northern California (1964). Boyd, Gunn, Kevin Borland and other Melbourne architects were picking up on Moore's programmatic juxtaposition of platform floors and ceilings, saddlebag room additions and stage-like interiors. Boyd's contemporary house for Grant and Mary Featherston was completed around the same time as Baronda.

Despite the regular grid, Baronda's elevations were dramatically irregular. Individual cantilevered pods with simple skillion roofs and rough-sawn vertical timber infill panels drew upon a 'shed aesthetic,' once common in rural Australia, and receiving renewed attention.¹⁷ Moore drew on similar vernacular sources in California, and this, in part, explained his warm reception by Australian architects after 1964. These dramatically expressed levels and volumes coalesced in Baronda's timber brutalist imagery as internal areas were expressed in the building's rugged profile, exploiting chiaroscuro effects.

The interior's warm natural light and openness contributed to a spiritual freedom, reasserting Gunn's youthful sensitivity to environments. Baronda distinctly recalled the multi-level, multi-pod cubby house Gunn had built as a nine-year old for his brothers. They remembered it vividly 40 years later.

Opposite

Baronda House,
NSW, 1968-1969,
architect Graeme
Gunn, photographer
Judith Trimble.
© 2024 Judith Trimble



Multi-density housing 1967–1968

For Gunn, a disappointing outcome of the Merchant Builders experience was losing control over individual clients' own built environments. Anxious to save costs, too few clients contacted Ellis Stones' landscaping firm, and other private builders, with no real commitment to the Merchant Builders ethic, thoroughly compromised Gunn's designs. While popular with clients who understood the Merchant Builders' vision, most of these project houses ended up scattered through the suburbs, one or two in a given street. Their project houses did not ultimately change the public's taste for conspicuous self-expression. This led, on one path, to the "McMansion." Other developers preferred virtual uniformity across expansive outer suburban sites — but very much on their own terms.

Yencken believed multi-density development provided a better opportunity to integrate all the elements of their environmental design: landscape, materials, profiles and scale, while housing several families on what was effectively a single site. This was also Gunn's first excursion into clearly alternative land use, which would become a lifetime passion. Facilitating this development was the Victorian Strata Titles Act, 1967, closely following New South Wales. Strata provided clear property titles for individual units, stimulating institutional lending, and low-rise, multi-density housing in both states. This had already produced a noted design: Hely, Bell & Horne's Glebe cluster housing in central Sydney (1963), which was given detailed coverage in *Architecture in Australia* in 1964.

Working with Tony Arnold of estate agents Arnold and Sandor to find appropriate sites in high-end suburbs, Merchant Builders became a builder-developer, building Gunn's new townhouse designs and combining them with Ellis Stones' landscaping. They began with a two-stage development, each of four houses, at Yuille Street, Brighton, using two Merchant Builders' designs: Gunn's courtyard project house and his new two-storey house. For another in Sorrett Avenue, Malvern development, Gunn designed

a complex of two-storey and single storey houses, while at Yarra Street, Hawthorn, and Kensington Road, South Yarra, new adjoining houses were required to solve particular site issues. Two other developments from this period were at Grange Road, Toorak and Molesworth Street, Kew.

Grange Road Townhouses

John Ridge's Boston Timber Company purchased a steeply sloping site in Grange Road, Toorak, and commissioned five townhouses. Here lighter brown Clifton bricks were used to produce a tough aesthetic of boldly chamfered two-storey walls, the strong diagonals articulating individual units descending along one side of the shared driveway. They appear densely urban, as with steep Mediterranean village streetscapes, but having distinctly sculptural rather than flat facades. This approach reflected the continuing influence of Bernard Rudofsky's *Architecture without Architects*, published in 1963, which had Boyd's particular favour, and which soon marked contemporary site massing by Daryl Jackson and Evan Walker for housing projects in South Melbourne and Carlton. The Grange Road houses opened into private garden courts landscaped by Ellis Stones. Interiors were arranged on multiple levels, incorporating the entry, six steps below the living room, bedrooms on two different levels and a mezzanine study overlooking the living room. Ridge's own townhouse at the bottom of the site, was more spacious, and included a rumpus room below the living room, overlooking a larger garden and swimming pool.

White painted interiors provided a strong contrast to the very dark exposed timber details, while the clean lines of Nexus cabinetry complemented the interior architecture. Only four townhouses were built when Ridge chose to retain a majestic eucalypt instead of building the fifth townhouse, a personal commitment to the environmental conservation the Merchant Builders team advocated. Preserving trees was also a Melbourne Modernist tradition. Grounds had been building around trees since 1953–54, as had Boyd. Peter McIntyre's early designs, and Kevin Borland's, were noted for this also.

Continued



Above
Molesworth Street
Townhouses, Kew, 1968,
architect Graeme Gunn,
photographer Kurt Veld.
Courtesy John Gollings.
© 2024 Estate of Kurt
Veld.

Molesworth Street Townhouses 1968

The most celebrated of Gunn's townhouses were those at Molesworth Street, Kew, again for Merchant Builders. Here Gunn rejected the rustic idiom. While the Grange Road and Yarra Grove groups presented strong sculptural masses, and Kensington Close had a distinctive balance of mass and void, at Molesworth Street Gunn's enactment of New Brutalism is distinct and powerful. Stepping up a large, steep site above the street, five townhouses addressed the central driveway, soon paved with robust bluestones. As with the Richardson house, the two-storey Molesworth Street townhouses were built of light grey concrete block. Hard-edged rectangular houses, with parapet walls and large cantilevered balconies, punched the air. Contrasting monumental black-stained *brise soleil* to balconies emphasised a new toughness.

The houses' powerful appearance matched the New Brutalist aesthetic Gunn exploited, simultaneously, in *béton brut* for the Plumbers and Gasfitters Union headquarters and exemplified his distinction between appropriate form-making interpretations, according to client and function. At Molesworth Street the concept, less sculpturally plastic, utilised strictly planar juxtaposition to monumental effect. While some houses were sited parallel and others at right-angles to the common driveway, they rose uncompromisingly, like a modern recast hill town, again using the casual assemblage being suggested by vernacular settlements. Their heroic austerity making an emphatic statement, modified only by more planting by

Stones, and by tall eucalypts left on the site. Plans echo long narrow Victorian terrace houses, while providing spacious and light-filled modern living. The Molesworth Street townhouses were awarded the RAI (Vic) Bronze Medal in 1970. Townhouse developments were well adapted for strata titling and soon became increasingly popular for inner-suburban living, especially in Sydney and Melbourne.

Elliston

Merchant Builders were soon presented with new opportunities for planned living environments, again commissioning Gunn's participation. Elliston (named for Ellis Stones) was a suburban estate already subdivided into typical house blocks (15.24m frontages x 45.72m deep) on short streets running gently downhill from a main thoroughfare to a public park in Rosanna.

In 1969, the Heidelberg City Council (HCC) commissioned Merchant Builders to develop a controlled family housing project of 285 houses in three stages over three years. Here was an opportunity to demonstrate the possibility of achieving a sensitive cohesive environment in an ordinary suburb, over an entire subdivision, this time under Uniform Building Regulations (UBRs).

At Elliston, the house sites ran north-south, rendering them unsuitable for Gunn's project house, which needed northern sun on their long boundaries. A team of five firms of like-minded architects was assembled to design a new house range for the project. Meeting jointly, they



would ensure compatible forms, materials and variety without losing cohesion. They designed 19 houses. Stones designed all landscaping, ensuring integration. The HCC also commissioned him to enhance the large public park, previously a golf course.

The 70 houses completed sold slowly. The public was not ready for such visibly integrated and homogeneous living, despite the variety offered, preferring more conspicuous self-expression.¹⁸ The HCC sold the remaining lots at the end of the 3-year contract.

Winter Park and the Cluster Code

Gunn's professional life expanded with membership of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (Victoria) (RAIA Vic) Council, and in 1971-1972 as chair of the new, socially concerned Public Services Committee, encouraging public advocacy in conservation and town planning, and, stemming from a new involvement, working to halt wholesale demolition of Melbourne's inner-city suburbs. Throughout the 1970s he represented the RAIA (Vic) on the autonomous committee established in 1971 by the Victorian Minister for Local Government, Alan Hunt, and chaired by Yencken, to deliver Cluster Code legislation enabling imaginative siting of buildings for social interaction, amenity and economy. The committee sought a code with guidelines allowing flexibility, rather than limiting regulations.

Yencken was inspired by Walter Burley Griffin's Castlecrag NSW, and his subdivision at Eaglemont in Melbourne,

avoiding tedious suburban street grids. In 1969, Yencken and Ridge committed to building a cluster housing project to demonstrate the code's application. As the project was almost completed before the Model Cluster Code in 1978, Winter Park was necessarily a Strata Title development.

Winter Park (1971-1981) was built in Doncaster, on a 1.6-hectare natural bushland site. After attempts to create sensitive living environments through project houses, town houses, and Elliston, Winter Park offered another opportunity to demonstrate flexible planning at traditional low density, satisfying the Uniform Building Regulations (UBR). Gunn was the architect, and Stones designed the landscaping, including gardens for all the houses. The entire site was treated as a single entity, where houses could be sited freely, incorporated into the environment rather than imposed upon it. Each house had its own private open space, but there were no long driveways, paling fences, or obvious front or back yards. Open space normally consumed individually was aggregated into a large, centrally located private park, comprising twenty-five percent of the whole site, to be shared by all residents.

While conserving Winter Park's native trees, Gunn grouped 20 houses around four brick-paved courts, nestled into the site's contours. Around each court, five of his project houses¹⁹ were sited for privacy, aspect, and climate. Materials were again low maintenance and unpainted. Grazia Gunn introduced new colours, enhancing the rustic aesthetic with earthy sandstock bricks and warm brown and grey stains for exposed timbers.

Today, Winter Park is admired, certainly in architectural circles, and largely retains its romantic natural environment, but elsewhere cluster planning has been a piecemeal development, its harmonious potential poorly understood.

Vermont Park, again also built during the 1970s, was another Merchant Builders development, responding to Cluster Code ideals on a barren, 3.6-hectare site. The project was designed and landscaped by Tract Consultants, initially established by Yencken after Stones' death. While a new generation of architects was invited to design the houses, Gunn contributed three new designs to the project: the Long, Corner and Split-Level houses, now markedly simpler in external form. Grazia's influence is apparent, this time in pastel rather than rustic colours, signifying a new aesthetic in Gunn's work, for both public and private commissions.

Scroggie house, 1976

The Scroggie-Clair house turned away completely from the brick and timber Merchant Builders houses. Scroggie-Clair house, built at the blind end of Kensington Road, South Yarra, overlooked Como Park and the Yarra River, its main elevation cantilevered high above them. Like some earlier houses, Scroggie house turned away from the street, its plain pastel-painted masonry walls denoting privacy. Inside, an atrium recalled the Richardson house, thirteen years earlier. This time, however, the atrium was located to one side of the plan: a smaller and deeper rectangular space enclosed by solid walls, whose height was raised further by lattice walls and a lofty, flat lattice roof. Softened daylight in

this silent, enclosed space was meditative, the sun's strength muted as it played across pale masonry walls and cast softly patterned shadows across others, while nurturing minimal, elegant planting. Its privacy bespoke the house's urban identity, and Gunn's inward-turning to mark urban location, in the tradition of Melbourne's Grounds and Boyd.

In contrast, light was strong and direct in the spacious east-oriented living room with white walls and white marble flooring, and in the main bedroom above it. The Scroggie house was another of Gunn's imaginative and sophisticated early houses, embracing the lessons of his youth and his increasing design experience, for a new still, calm intimacy.

High Tech and the Redlich House, 1977

By 1975, Gunn's palette was changing again. He was experimenting with aspects of High Tech for architectural expression. Ross Ramus, newly returned from Britain, then the hotbed of High-Tech Systems Design, was installed in Gunn's new office in Richmond (1976). But Gunn personally interpreted the ethic, rather than adopt the style. Whilst services and structure might be bravely exposed, even accentuated, they were adapted to Gunn's own purposes, evident in the brightly painted pergola shading Chelsworth Park Sports Pavilion, *brise soleil* against pastel walls and pergolas defining otherwise scaleless open space for his expansive Community Health Centres, and space frames modifying his public squares. The giant pergola enhancing volume was the dominant motif in the Redlich house design.

The Redlich house in Caroline Street, South Yarra, presented an attractive, if 'blind' façade to the street. Grazia Gunn's choice of soft blue colours defined the trabeated system beside pale cream masonry walls. Human scale was emphasised by the diagonal, effectively reducing the façade wall height, and the narrow entrance was accessible down narrow steps. The interior opened from a small hall into the house's 'great space,' a long volume accentuated by a substantial bright blue painted tubular, air conditioning duct, diminishing in perspective along the high coved ceiling. Free-standing structural posts were clearly expressed as working members.

The primary motif, however, was the 'giant order' pergola. Painted bright blue, and rising high above the full length of the flat roofed house and its terrace, it linked and framed the neighbouring garden growing on higher ground, three metres above the terrace. It also defined a double height space over the terrace, creating a grand garden 'room' integral to the house.

The Redlich house aesthetics of pale cream-coloured masonry, expansive glazing, and boldly articulated high tech motifs, had few aesthetic associations with Gunn's earliest houses. Similar in plan to his smaller Cellar house (1968) for Merchant Builders, the Redlich house was long and open, with all living areas sharing the terrace. However, the main bedroom, over the study at one end of the house, was isolated with its own small, walled terrace, and a view of the large terrace below. It was the role of the great pergola simultaneously to mediate between the upper terrace, the main house and its terrace, and the high neighbouring garden. It was a *tour de force*.

Millswyn 1977–1982

In 1976, following his conversion of the Shelley Street office, Graeme and Grazia Gunn, Andrew Reed, Len Hayball, Ross Ramus, and Jean Miller formed the LARGGA partnership, named for each member's initial, to purchase and redevelop for residential use the Maples furniture warehouse built in 1922 in Millswyn Street, South Yarra. All members

were either architects or associated with architecture, and all invested their private funds, committing to the project and the newish idea of warehouse conversion. This has an affinity with RMIT's Gossard building which was refurbished with alcoves and cubbies during Gunn's time as Dean. The result recalled the little house he had built his brothers. Charles Moore had also, by then, similarly reshaped the interior of Paul Rudolph's Art and Architecture Building at Yale University in the USA. It was an expensive and brave undertaking. Having the courage of their convictions, Graeme and Grazia sold their elegant house in nearby Park Street, to support their Millswyn investment. Loft living was well established in the USA and UK, and attracting interest on a small scale among local architects. In his address to the 1980 ANZAAS Conference, Gunn promoted warehouse conversion for its potential for imaginative housing alternatives and rejuvenating inner city residential areas. He promoted conversion of industrial buildings to "new and economically viable" uses rather than strict restoration or renovation.

Millswyn comprised a terrace of three Victorian houses on the street front, a mechanic's workshop, and the central five-storey warehouse with two-storey annexes attached to the west, north and south elevations. The Victorian terrace was rehabilitated, and the mechanic's workshop converted to a studio apartment in stage one, then sold to fund the warehouse conversion. The west annex to the warehouse was converted into two apartments, and the roofing stripped from the north and south annexes, leaving their steel trusses for re-use as vine-covered pergolas over the north garden and south carpark. Warehouse levels were stripped and refitted, retaining exposed steel structure and large open space. The five floors were divided north-south or east-west into apartments or left undivided. Grazia again selected all the soft colours for walls and exposed steel structure. New timber floors were polished. In these spacious interiors, only bedrooms and bathrooms were enclosed. New balconies extended living areas beyond the perimeter.

From the human scale of houses on Millswyn Street, a short lane led into a wider space to the Annex and into the great forecourt from which rose the old Maples Warehouse: five floors of sheer red brick walls, modified by an entrance awning, several balconies, and the steel trussed pergola over carparking along the south boundary. The lane and forecourt were repaved with continuous bluestone blocks, and Tract Consultants landscaped the site with trees and vines, and planting in the long, pergola-covered north garden. Millswyn clearly demonstrated the chance to create alternative living styles and attractive precincts without destroying the scale, character or historic integration of established neighbourhoods.

Conclusion

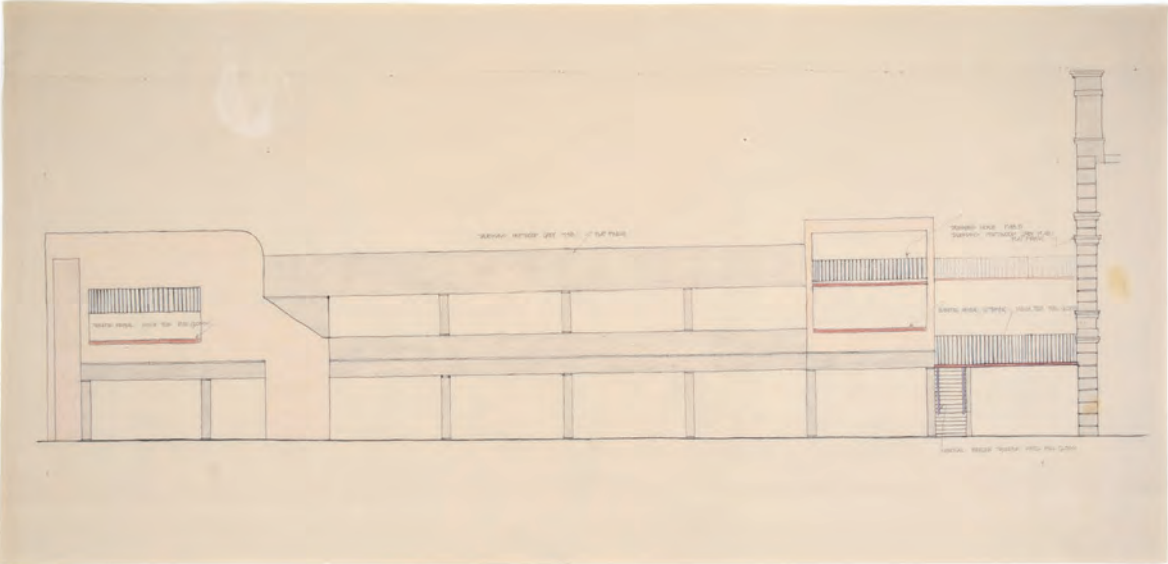
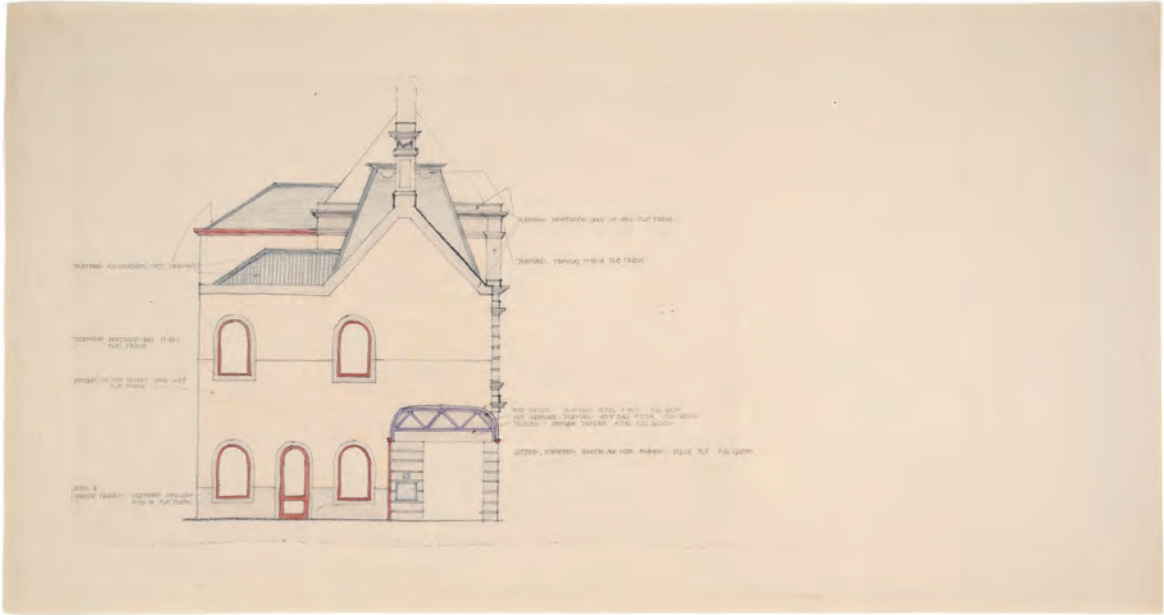
A courageous idealist, from the beginning Gunn constantly pushed boundaries in architectural form, responses to built and natural context, use of building regulations and teaching. As an avant-garde architect he sought originality, modified by fitness to purpose and context. As a team member, leader, or sole architect, he worked for Boyd's "... higher quality of living for which the building provides, the something more that turns a building, however slightly, into an expression of the human spirit."²⁰ He had just begun.

ENDNOTES

- 1 For more complete analyses, contexts, and documentation, see Judith A. Trimble, "Graeme Gunn: A Critical Art History," (PhD diss., Monash University, Melbourne, 1986).
- 2 George Molnar, "New Humanism or the Style of the Future," *Architecture in Australia* 54, no.3 (September 1965): 126-131.
- 3 Graeme Gunn, interview with the author, October 14, 1980, and interview with Gunn's brothers, January 31, 1981.
- 4 Gunn became a registered architect in 1963. He was renowned in the office for his insight and drafting skill.
- 5 Celebrated designer Janne Faulkner recalled Gunn's love of new ideas and new materials.
- 6 "House, Doncaster, Victoria," *Architecture in Australia* 52, no.4 (December 1963): 134.
- 7 For a summary of Grazia's extensive career and achievements, see Monash University c.2016, accessed September 25, 2024, "Dr Grazia Gunn – Alumni," <http://www.monash.edu/distinguished-alumni-awards>.
- 8 For a complete archive for Merchant Builders's history see *Merchant Builders, Towards a New Archive*, (Parkville, Vic: Melbourne School of Design, 2016), 1-128.
- 9 For a valuable contextual overview of the project and cluster housing in Australia, see Jennifer Taylor, *Australian Architecture Since 1960* (Sydney: The Law Book Company, 1986), ch.8.
- 10 In the following decades, individual owners' increasingly have asserted their preference for individual expression and competitive affluence, challenging the single-storey, three or four bedroom, two-bathroom houses of eighteen square feet in the 1960s and 1970s, which allowed ample space for trees, gardens and play areas, opting for two-storey, pseudo Tuscan or other stylistic, often eave-less, mansions on suburban sites, crowding out their sites.
- 11 Robin Boyd, *Living in Australia* (Melbourne: Robin Boyd Foundation/Thames & Hudson, 2013, first published 1970), 133.
- 12 Gunn had designed linked pavilions for several earlier projects, notably the 1964 Gas and Fuel, Age Small Homes Competition (Second Prize), and the Clarke house, 1965, where he met Grazia.
- 13 Ken Woolley house, Mosman house (1962-1963) is a precedent.
- 14 Mrs B.L. Doby, interview with the author, May 31, 1979.
- 15 Baronda is protected as a building of State significance and is listed on the NSW State Heritage Register, <https://www.hms.heritage.nsw.gov.au/App/Item/ViewItem?itemId=5061816>, accessed July 5, 2024. See also "Baronda" Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baronda>, accessed July 5, 2024. This Wikipedia article was originally based on Baronda's entry in the New South Wales State Heritage Register.
- 16 Gunn first met Yencken while working as Boyd's project manager there. Later, they studied Chinese language together.
- 17 Harry Seidler's award-winning Manager's Lodge at Thredbo, c.1965, was influential, but only during Gunn's early design stages. Examples were also prominent in international journals.
- 18 Graeme Gunn and David Yencken, "Perception, Expectation and Experience" in George Seddon and Mavis Davis (eds) *Man and Landscape in Australia: Towards an Ecological Vision*, (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service 1976), and John Paterson, David Yencken, Graeme Gunn, *A Mansion of No House*, (Melbourne: Hawthorn Press 1976).
- 19 His Terrace, Studio and Courtyard houses, and new Two-storey and Cellar houses.
- 20 Boyd, *Living in Australia*, 133.

Gunn in the Press

Norman Day



edited by Anthony Clarke



Section of the Prahran Market facade: recycling a way of life.

PRAHRAN MARKET is one of the most successful buildings produced in Melbourne in the past decade.

It is just now being finished, some 10 years since construction began, and then only after proponents quelled the flames of fierce opposition.

Detractors mounted a good argument against a new market — apart from the typically conservative resistance to any sort of change.

Their arguments went something like this:

Why alter the quality of a successful place? Why improve an industrial warehouse space that operates only for two or three days? Surely the changes would raise costs and force lower income shoppers away? We'll all be forced to travel to the Victoria Market where quality food can be bought in a quality environment!

Part of architect Gunn Hayball's problem was to answer those arguments and, at the same time, satisfy the local council, their own architectural sensibilities and the cohesive group of stallholders and shoppers for which the market is a way of life.

That type of architectural problem, where community group resistance, economic reality and artistic ambition combine, is typical of a 1970s project in Australia.

Gunn Hayball's work at Prahran is the best local solution to that problem that I know of.

Prahran well marketed

ARCHITECTURE

Norman Day

They have managed the staged development with dexterity so major changes have occurred but over time like good wine ageing.

The size and quality of the market has increased but the steel frames and iron roofs stay. So does the face-to-face attraction of laneway display shopping, with careful attention to basket shelves, drainage, lighting, smells and noise.

One of the options proposed for the market was a homogenised shopping centre, another glossy, glittering mirrors and air-conditioned box of tricks.

By contrast Prahran market remains bare and understated, quaint yet comfortable. Little ceiling heaters only take the edge off cold air, but early morning market shoppers wear jumpers to keep warm.

In addition to rebuilding the main market hall, meat and delicatessen arcades, there are offices and shops, some new, others recycled from the old market building.

Most of these sections are built around an open plaza that works better than the City Square because it is enclosed and calm.

Success for Prahran Market is a mixture of controlled new design and inherited old character. The result is a complicated building that has developed naturally the charm and color of the old place and is thoroughly fresh and efficient.

In the process Gunn Hayball have faced issues of designing new architecture next to an 1890s building.

Rather than proposing an historical recreation or alternatively a post-modern wedding cake, they maintained their characteristically workmanlike, contemporary approach.

Thank goodness for that. The new parts are ordinary, decent and workable buildings without pretence. They link to the old building with appropriate scale and color.

Cubic forms, slick glass, industrial detailing and smooth pink and grey colors are sufficiently fashion-free to remain appropriate for years.

My impression is that the long term project development time has enabled the architects to spend considerable time and thought solving important details.

There is more than common attention to comfortable outdoor seating and wind-free spaces. Signs are controlled but free enough to be unpredictable and patterned tile arcades add rhythm to the meat arcades.

Awkward planning problems of produce and rubbish deliveries are simply resolved so they don't affect the public.

While it is true that food prices have risen, we can afford to pay for architecture as pleasant as that at Prahran Market.



Opposite Top Left
Photograph of Prahran Market (1891), 1975-1980, architect Charles D'Ebros, photographer The Shooting Gallery Pty. Gift of Graeme Gunn 2018.

Opposite Top Right
Photograph of Prahran Market (1891), 1975-1980, architects Gunn Hayball Pty. Ltd., photographer The Shooting Gallery Pty. Gift of Graeme Gunn 2018.

Opposite and Below
Drawings showing paint schedules for Prahran Market, 1980, architects Gunn Hayball Pty. Ltd. Gift of Graeme Gunn 2018. © 2024 Len Hayball and Estate of Graeme Gunn.

This page
Media clipping titled "Prahran Well Marketed," *The Age*, author Norman Day, July 1, 1981. Gift of Edmond & Corrigan. Gift of Edmond & Corrigan 2017. © 2024 Norman Day.

The old baths are back in the swim

IN 1965 a publication called 'Building Ideas' was produced as a guide to Melbourne's architecture.

It was designed to celebrate our best and most important buildings, a supplement to an architectural convention held that year.

Missing from that publication was the City Baths, at the top end of Swanston Street. The baths also are not mentioned in other historical surveys, yet they occupy a dominant site and are built with consistent architectural character and unabashed flair.

They were built in 1903, designed by architects E. J. & J. J. Clarke (J. J. also designed the Treasury buildings) and generally were modelled on English bath houses of that period.

It was an Edwardian building, at least the facades were, with a simple internal layout and steel truss roof like those in a shed.

According to a writer of the period they were designed with clear planning to separate the various functions and segregated for the sexes (and other social reasons).

"Two large swimming baths are provided, besides Turkish, vapor, slipper, and other baths." There was gallery seating overlooking the men's baths and a mikvah (a Jewish ritual bath) elsewhere.

The building is not a masterpiece of design, it has not attracted acclaim for its beauty, creative integrity or brilliant engineering, but it is a lot of fun, and even more so following its recent upgrading by the city council.

Architect Kevin Greenhatch — associated with Gunn, Williams, Fender — has exhumed the body of the old building and given it a new life.

Thankfully they have not chosen to produce a carbon copy of the original building in the way that registered, classified, or other-



wise-protected buildings are renovated. The most productive restoration for a building is measured, after all, not in terms of bricks and mortar, but in a productive, useful, busy new life to serve those who will use it.

So, where the original building had two entry doors marked "women" and "men" leading into segregated pools, the new baths have a central stair, one door and one reception desk to suit the mores of the 1980s.

Internally, the old baths are difficult to define. The baths are roofed but have large side windows to maintain the clear crisp Edwardian qualities of the old building.

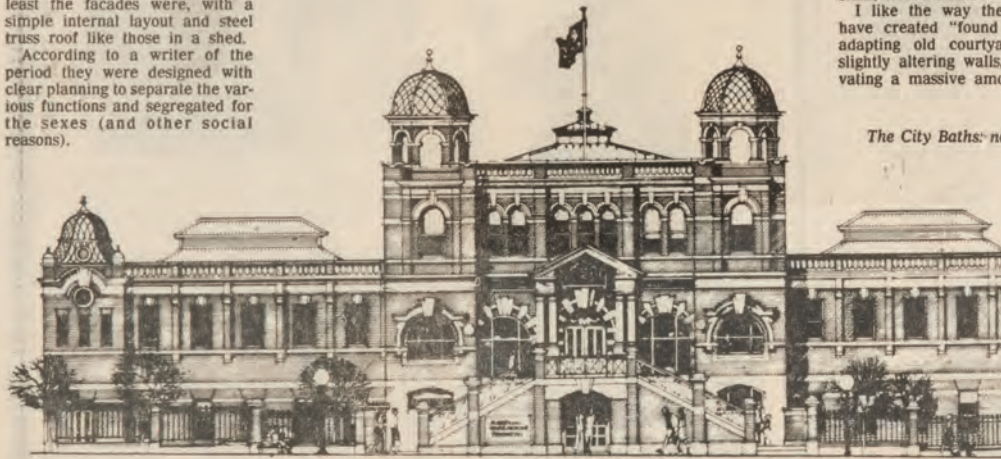
Changes have not been interpreted from old photographs and paintings.

The architects have been liberal with their changes that the charm of the Edwardian windows and decorative tiling are maintained. The colors make for an interior similar to that of the 1920s. They are in fact chosen to be a temporary color change, a historical precedent.

The new baths are not just for washing and bathing. They have squash courts, a science clinic, aerobic room, and a bistro.

I like the way they have created "found" spaces by adapting old courtyards, slightly altering walls, and creating a massive amount of space.

The City Baths: n



Above Left

Media clipping titled "The old baths are back in the swim," *The Age*, 1983, author Norman Day. Gift of Edmond & Corrigan 2017.
© 2024 Norman Day.

Top Right

Schematic Design City Baths Melbourne - Renovations and Additions, 1980, architects Kevin Greenhatch, Arggroup Pty Ltd, Gift of Graeme Gunn 2018.

Middle Right

System drawing for City Baths Melbourne, 1980, architects Gunn Hayball Pty. Ltd. Gift of Graeme Gunn 2018.
© Len Hayball and Estate of Graeme Gunn.

Bottom Right

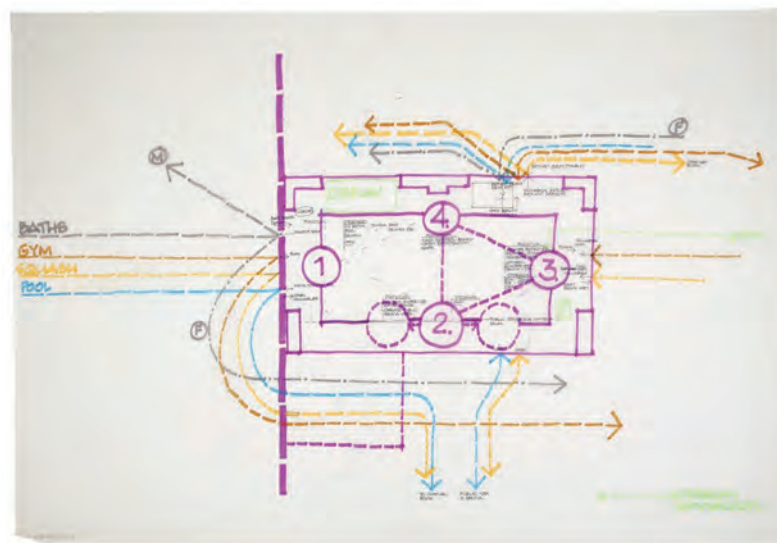
Media Clipping titled "Another City Square," *The Age*, January 20, 1981, author Norman Day. Gift of Edmond & Corrigan 2017.
© 2024 Norman Day.

the swim

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from underneath the building, in which to place the bulky air-handling equipment.
It is an architectural approach of leanness and hunger, draining every last value from the old building.
The old roof has been treated with respect; its towers and turrets are now glossy maroon and new sections, ducts and flues seem quite at home among the clutter of elements there.
New squash courts at the eastern end are added in a character sympathetic to the original, but they are bulkier, which is the correct answer to the problem of joining old and new buildings.
But the baths' major attribute will always be its usefulness to the ratepayers, schoolchildren, local business people and RMIT students who will use it.
This renovation will enable thousands of Melburnians to enjoy again the colorful old birthday cake at the top of Swanston Street.
It's a good job.

ot a masterpiece of design . . . but it is a lot of fun.



ARTS R

ARCHITECTURE

Norman Day

Another City Square?

SPENCER SQUARE could be a subtle joke, built at the expense of Melbourne City Council and the ratepayers.

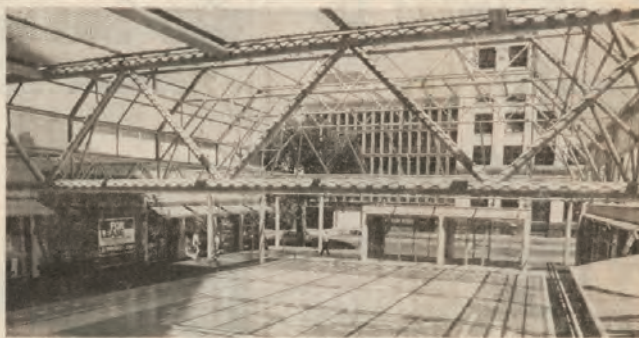
The new open space, on the corner of Collins and Spencer streets, is really a shopping mall on the way to Spencer Street Station; a space where commuters check their purses and collect their spare dollars for the train trip home.

But it is not designed as a bland empty space, because the architects, Gunn and Hayball, are thoroughly post-modern.

They have put a grab-bag of ideas into the square. There is some decorative stuff, brutal concrete, jockey pattern-making and serious social comment.

It takes courage and skill for architects to use humor in their buildings, especially when the Melbourne City Council is involved.

Gunn and Hayball have adapted their design competition entry for the main City Square. It is



Spencer Square: suggestions of protective screening and Persian bazaars.

humorously re-scaled to suit a busy, unattractive corner site.

The most obvious joke is the way the architects have made Spencer Square appear to be a retail development, with shops on three sides — as if to draw attention to the corny ice-cream parlors in the City Square.

The steel roof is a gigue (in the nicest way), overdesigned as a reminder of the cream vaulted arcade next door to the Regent Theatre.

Then, to rub the joke in, there is a complex tiled plaza, designed, according to the architects,

as a replica of a Persian rug. I assume that is a reference to the bazaar bargaining characteristics of Melbourne City Council.

Much of the square is sensibly roofed with a cream steel frame and panels of heavy gauge wire mesh which look like scaffolding and protective screening.

The intention of that device may be to reduce gusty winds produced by the nearby MMBW skyscraper . . . visitors to Spencer Square should feel safe with a wire protective roof between them and the sky.

The square raises the important question of an image — or flavor — for Melbourne.

It should refer to parkland. It should build on our famous gardens by emphasising greenery, natural simplicity, low cost and grace.

These are not found at the shopping centres with hard paved courtyards that our councillors seem to favor.

Spencer Square may appeal to the councillors. It has its uses as a mini-retail centre. But it does little to enhance the general style or appearance of the city.

Continued



10- THE AGE, Tuesday 13 October 1981

ARTS REVIEW

An elegant pointer to work of the 70s

ARCHITECTURAL displays can be deceptive.

How often have we seen the prettiest drawings win a competition ahead of a better idea, or a most dramatic photograph published despite the building's unsuitability for its function?

I have even seen beautiful photographs of Collins Place which make it look comfortable and livable.

The 'Seven in the Seventies' exhibition at Monash University shows elegantly by its own excellence how deceptive some architectural displays can be. And the exhibition also directs attention to an architect whose talent, in my belief, underestimated.

Exhibition curator Joseph Duncan and Dr Conrad Hamann have mounted big black and white photographs of seven architects' work on wall panels with some additional models and plans.

Most of the photographs have been taken by Adrian Featherston so they represent one consistent view of buildings, which gives the display a rare evenness.

I had never considered that Edmond & Corrigan's buildings had much to do with Cocks and Carmichael's or Max May's. But by comparable presentation, similarities are evident.

ARCHITECTURE

Norman Day

As Dr Hamann notes in his introduction to the exhibition, there are consistencies of approach among the seven architects, who design sinewy structures with light beams and overhangs and decoratively shaded trellises.

Dr Hamann attributes those characteristics to a physical representation of the Australian myth (the skinny, strong, tense heroes of the outback, Gallipoli and poetry) but I don't agree.

There are complicated ways to create architecture, but the mass of immediate excitement from Europe and America to Australia — the internationalisation of the art — is the strongest influence.

There is as much a Californian invention in Gunn & Hayball's trellises, of Frank Gehry's loose film sets in Peter Carmichael's house and Hedjuk's planning in Daryl Jackson's Cox house, as anything else. And none of that is bad.

The major impression from the work displayed, which after all is just the peak of a mountain of Melbourne architecture of the 1970s, is the quality and quantity of output. Although nobody would argue that there was a particular local school, it is clear that courageous, clever and often brilliant

buildings were created in Melbourne during that decade.

I would favor an exhibition where the architects present their schemes individually. There is a stronger impression of the ideas behind architecture when we see, for example, John Gilling's color photographs of Edmond & Corrigan's churches, Peter Crose's impeccable scale models and pastel drawings, Daryl Jackson's delicate ink line perspectives or Gunn and Hayball's detail models.

Nevertheless 'Seven in the Seventies' makes one thing clear. The grand man of Melbourne architecture, the hero for two and possibly three decades of students and the consistently fresh creative talent of our time, is Kevin Borland.

His buildings are weird and wonderful. Obvious references to international influences are difficult to imply when geography and accident seem just as important. His feelings for craft and technique, for alarming space and tense forms and for play and humor are patent.

How it can be that this exhibition does not even show Borland's Clyde Cameron College is beyond me, but suffice to say he could alone fill a gallery well enough to nourish us for years.

(The 'Seven in the Seventies' exhibition is at the Exhibition gallery, department of visual arts, Monash University and runs until 13 November.)



Seven In The Seventies INTRODUCTION

This exhibition brings together work by seven architects of particular importance to Melbourne architecture in the seventies. The exhibition represents a cross-section of the architects' work which documents a change in the direction of Melbourne architecture during the decade 1970-1980.

In the late nineteen-fifties and early nineteen-sixties the prevailing order was late International Style. Tower building was at the heart of architectural thinking. In 1961 Robin Boyd spoke of a new age where glass towers would provide a guileless shelter for men whose lives have found order. Certainly other architecture, such as houses or small buildings, seemed to be fragments sliced or peeled off the towers. Structure and pure form were pre-eminent, few new buildings considered their surroundings in terms of urbanism. Moreover, structure and pure form took precedence over function in its narrow sense of circulation and activity, and its broader sense of providing a sense of place and an enjoyable and dignified surrounding for human activity.

From around 1970 these architects represented in the exhibition started to turn the tables in Melbourne. All were distinctively individualistic in their approach, yet they had a general source of agreement: the house, not the tower, was the focus of their architecture. The house gave forms through which it was possible to achieve human scale and enrich surroundings. These architects were able to give the house a new independence from its tower form, from the late International Style emphasis on structure, pure form and universality. The way they did this was to rediscover Australian popular building. This meant, primarily, the homestead and the bush hut, and later, the imagery and forms of the inner suburbs and city area. In this group, it was only Edmond and Corrigan who found nourishment in the suburbs. Country and hinter city vernacular provided a rich enough source housing types, with their turret-like halls and endless extensions, seemed to celebrate the human presence. As these architects grew interested in traditional vernacular buildings, they sensed wider planning possibilities and their approach to planning freed up accordingly.

As Le Corbusier discovered the track through space, so did these architects. With later Corbusier, it was a long march past sculptured objects. With post-war Melbourneans generally lacking access to cheap concrete, the spatial procession opened out into new spaces, and a new improvisation crept in as architects became more and more interested in the space seen in passing. Slowly they developed plans that encouraged these momentary sensations, expanding a corner turn here, dramatising an internal balcony there. This freedom was in marked contrast to contemporary American architects' planning, which was emphasising the fixed and the symmetrical as they rediscovered their own Beaux-Arts.

But American ideas were shared here, and in particular Australians moved in sympathy with the American quest for a new monumentality, bringing buildings a renewed richness and strength. Lacking cheap concrete, timber and metal were the answer. It would be difficult to make these materials monolithic, but they could have musculature. During the seventies we see these architects building into their work a physical representation of the Australian myth: winniness, toughness, sinew. It came first in unplanned beams, in tree-trunk columns, and a sense of movement. It was to be found in work by architects these seven firms knew and admired. Harold Desbrowe Ansell was one, with his Eaglemont houses where hoops swung through rows of veranda rails. Roy Grounds was another, with his steel columns and bricked balconies shoved up against bagged brick walls. Indeed it can be argued that when Australia was most sure of its identity in architecture — during Federation, in the late 'thirties and then in the 'seventies — this winniness and sinew was what its best buildings revealed. When architects were less sure of themselves or their national identity, architecture grew heavy and static, as in the 1920s, or excessively spindly, technical and structural, as in the 1950s.

Kevin Borland is the oldest of this group. He had an early interest in technology which was reflected in his *Ctesiphon* house of 1952 and his association with the Olympic Pool. His more recent work has, however, returned to the bush for inspiration. Log posts, raw planking, prominent water tanks mark his housing, which is mostly in the country or in outer suburban areas. These come together in a casual, almost accidental way, as his buildings literally slide down their hilly sites. Typical of this is his *Nichols House* (1973), and *Launching Place Flats* (1974). Natural references extend inside Borland interiors are invariably stained wood. Something of the surrounding terrain comes in too. The path to the *Nichols House* bedrooms climbs up from the living areas through a series of small wooden 'hills'. And the main bedroom and kitchen form a building within a building, an edifice indoors that can be seen clearly through front windows from outside. There is a kind of lingering, an elaboration of space to dramatisate movement within the house. This corresponds with the development of spatial circumstance mentioned earlier. One can sense Kevin Borland's sympathy with Australian surroundings. His interest has, moreover, inclined towards the collective: schools, welfare



SEVEN IN THE SEVENTIES

KEVIN BORLAND,
COCKS and CARMICHAEL,
PETER CRONE,
EDMOND and CORRIGAN,
GUNN HAYBALL,
DARYL JACKSON,
MAX MAY.

EXHIBITION GALLERY,
MONASH UNIVERSITY,
Department of Visual Arts
October 9 to November 13, 1981

This exhibition has been made possible by generous grants from Merchant Builders Pty. Ltd. and the Vera Moore Fund of Monash University.

This Page
Seven in the Seventies, 1980, exhibition curator Conrad Hamann, publisher Monash University, Department of Visual Arts. Gift of Edmond & Corrigan 2017. © Monash University

Opposite
Media Clipping titled "An elegant pointer to the work of the 70s," *The Age*, October 13, 1981, author Norman Day. Gift of Edmond & Corrigan 2017. © 2024 Norman Day.

housing, trade union building. He has often worked on these in collaboration with other architects.

Cocks and Carmichael veered away from the 'fifties and early 'sixties approach in a series of beach houses (1972-1979) each of which emphasised solid plank walls and sheer expanses of window. But Peter Carmichael's own house at Sandringham (1977-78) and the houses which follow, such as the spectacular **Bos House** (1978-80) have narrow, raised solids surrounded by slender structure curving in and bracketing the long thin core. The steel tubes of this outer structure are bent faintly, evoking that tense, sinewy character that marks the development in Melbourne architecture of the Seventies. Cocks and Carmichael do not admit to any specific national feeling in their work, but their solutions are clearly in an Australian tradition. In recent years Cocks and Carmichael have begun exploring a gentle humour and irony in their work. An example is the classical lunettes and bubble cockpit canopy windows for the 1979-80 home of P.J. Pennycuik, a retired airlines captain. Their remarkable **Kendalls Liquor Store** (1980) uses the latticework like a Victorian summer house, to bathe the surrounding walls in banded shadow.

Peter Crone is the youngest of this group. He commenced his own practice immediately after training. He was a partner with Max May, though a free agent, and during this period he designed the **Heubner House** at Olinda (1975). This client shared Crone's interest in Le Corbusier, but the result again restates elements of an Australian tradition. The house has a clear core of served spaces, and spreading series of wooden extensions, moving outward in the radial manner of Australian country houses. Crone is renowned for fine detail, and develops similar surprises here. His **Porritt House** at Mount Martha (1978) is marked by a large steel girder hoisted up out of nowhere, while from another wall, a rambling wooden pergola sprouts, suggesting the ghost of a verandah. A mixture of nineteenth century and rural interests recur in his work, such as the wattle-bark motifs in the **Briggs House** at Lancasterfield (1979). Edmond and Corrigan differ significantly from the others in this group. While the house forms a vital focus of their work, it is generally the suburban house they are interested in, not a rural or urban type. The **Church of the Resurrection** (1975-76) and **St. Joseph's Chapel** (1976-78) draw on the suburban brick home, that repository of hopes and fears that Robyn Boyd first studied in **Australia's Home**. Edmond and Corrigan take everyday elements from suburban housing, and placing them in new contexts, give them new meaning. Edmond and Corrigan make extraordinarily wide references, both to historic forms and construction techniques. Yet both are strict and careful in their desire for cheap and functional

building. The **Resurrection Church** and **Caroline Chisholm Terrace** housing were each built for the cost of a medium-to-large house. At the same time, their view of architecture as art and politics is intense, often angry, often pessimistic. This can be seen in their competition design for **Parliament House** (1980). Here they argue the precarious nature of Australian democracy in a building composed of unstable, pivoting segments. The toughness of Edmond and Corrigan's work is informed by a national feeling, clearly thought out. It is interesting to sense that sinew in their work too, in their interest in steel structure juxtaposed with brick, the long, tough arms of the **St. Joseph's Chapel** awning or the girders on the **Keysborough School**, sliding from one post to another. One thing they have done is bring Australian sinew into suburban brick form.

Gunn Hayball is the office of Graeme Gunn, who has been designing houses since 1961. Gunn's **Shoebriidge House** of 1963 anticipated this whole movement in its use of natural materials and the low spreading form of country housing. It had a certain debt to the contemporary 'Sydney School'. Gunn's housing career was made by the Merchant Builders commissions of 1965 and after. **The Plumbers and Gasfitters Employees' Union Headquarters** (1969-70), is significant for its new toughness in an urban setting. It was in off-form concrete and hoisted off the street with a Corbusian monumentality. Yet the building's great frontal masses are tied down most carefully to the verandah angles and lines of the building. Much of the work shown here has maintained this consideration. **The Commercial Road facade of the Prahran Market** (1971-81) is another example, and inside, Gunn has developed lively forms using awnings and rail details that, while modern, retain the imagery of produce buildings. Again the columns and rails have a robust appearance and bind the forms together. In private work, where house clients still seek seclusion from the street, these railings and details appear in new forms, adding to seclusion by covering or framing screened courtyards as in the **Scroggie House**, South Yarra. The Australian 'sinew' is not so evident here, rather the structures frame and mark out space statically; the space itself is clearly defined, and its provision on circumstance is not so prominent.

Daryl Jackson and Evan Walker joined forces in 1971. Walker had returned from Canada, having worked with John Andrews. Jackson had returned from New York, having worked with Paul Rudolph. Their experience was similar to Corrigan, who had taken a post-graduate degree at Yale and then worked in New Haven and New York. Education and writing spending made Jackson and Walker's practices. They emphasised collective buildings: schools, civic centres, libraries. The **MLC Library** (1973) was

one of these. In off-form concrete, it had a monolithic toughness that compares with Gunn's Plumbers and Gasfitters building. It made some references to Italianate houses further up Gienferrie Road but in its immediate context, it was a clear addition. Jackson and Walker's subsequent work emphasised existing contents more thoroughly. After Walker left to join the State parliament, Jackson showed this interest in context with the **Abrahams House** at Brighton (1979-80). This design dissolved into a layering of walls on its bay side, then increased weight and included chimneys in a 1930s manner, to match earlier buildings. Jackson reintroduced the latticed screen, with its suggestions of the traditional Australian veranda. The screens on Jackson's new **Emu Ridge Government Housing** at Belconnen outside Canberra (1978-79) continue the theme of the corner and side-wall veranda, on fairly massive housing blocks. Jackson's own house at Shoreham seems to blend the still monumentality of Rudolph's American architecture with a tense, hovering structure of columns and beams.

Max May trained initially as an engineer, and has emphasised that he is a builder as much as an architect. This is seen dramatically in his additions to the **Trachsel House** in Hawthorn (1974). There, a corridor runs over a large enclosed swimming pool, and is supported by a huge, unplanned bridge truss, which pierces the floor, and runs up to the first floor ceiling. This detail typifies May's work, which is robust and emphasizes structure. May's architecture is not, however, the clear and unambiguous design of the 'fifties and early 'sixties. There is great complexity as walls, floors and voids perform different functions at once, and pass in and out of windows. The **Rattle House** at Harkaway (1974) shows this well, as does the **Ereaut House** of 1974-76, at Emerald. The **Bromley House** in Belgrave, under construction since 1973, moves into concrete. May uses the same scale and forms found in his timber architecture. Later a house in Toorak (1977-81) returns more to the idea of solid masonry, but with the same projections and interpenetration found in the earlier timber houses. The Toorak house, for example, has its glass front wall broken through with a massive brick study, and a screen projecting to one side has a 'ruined', incomplete appearance, in contrast to the long clean panel which ran up to the original 1974 design of the **Ereaut House**.

The variety and strength of the work of these architects have acted as a stimulus to younger architects while at the same time substantially altering our expectations of Australian architecture and its future direction.

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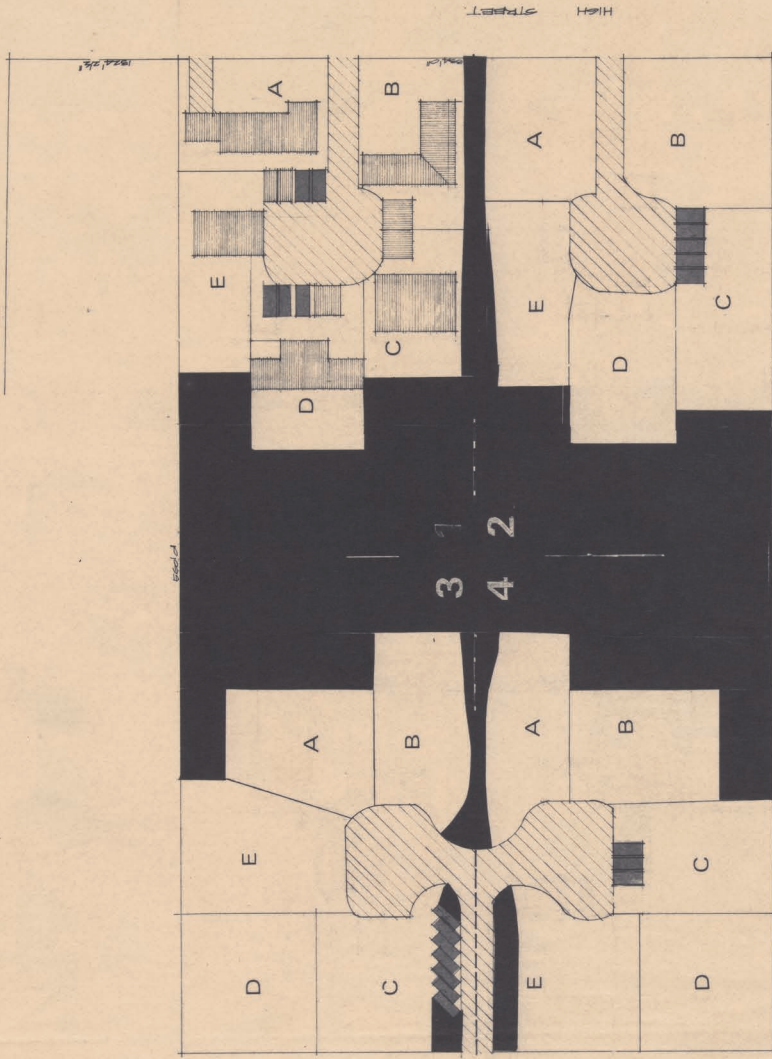






Graeme Gunn, Winter Park and Vermont Park

Anne Gartner



MANNINGHAM ROAD.



-  SHADDED AREA DONATES COMMUNAL PARKLAND.
-  DONATES CAR ACCESS FOR SITES AND VISITORS PARKING
-  DONATES INDIVIDUAL LONG
-  DONATES CAR PARKING FOR VISITORS.



5/8/49
 THE ARCHITECTS AND PLANNERS
 ASSOCIATION OF GREAT BRITAIN
 11, BEDFORD SQUARE, LONDON, W.1.
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 11, BEDFORD SQUARE, LONDON, W.1.

DEVELOPMENT AT HIGH STREET DONCASTER
 FOR MERCHANT BUILDERS PTY LTD.
 OVERALL SITE PLAN STAGE 1, 2, 3, 4.
 SCALE 1/2" = 10'
 DRAWN BY J. H. B. 1949
 CHECKED BY J. H. B. 1949
 ARCHITECTS

Graeme Gunn, Winter Park and Vermont Park

Anne Gartner

ABSTRACT

Graeme Gunn played a pivotal role in the design directions of Merchant Builders, as he was primarily responsible for the powerful image and aesthetics associated with the company's most innovative years. This article focusses on Gunn's work at Winter Park and Vermont Park. These cluster housing projects, which drew significantly on Merchant Builders' project house and town house experience, were intended to challenge and inform conventional Australian approaches to suburban subdivision.

Establishing Merchant Builders¹

David Yencken and John Ridge founded Merchant Builders in 1965. They were driven by a vision of reforming suburban housing, but surprisingly they held no formal qualifications in planning, architecture, construction, engineering, or real estate. They drew discerningly on their familiarity with overseas developments, their past business experience, and their inspired selection of design professionals, in particular Graeme Gunn as their architect and Ellis Stones as their landscaper.

Yencken had been involved with building one of the first motels in Australia, the Mitchell Valley Motel in Bairnsdale, and he later commissioned Robin Boyd as architect for the iconic Black Dolphin Motel in Merimbula. Yencken's friendship with Ridge was well established prior to the Black Dolphin period. Ridge had owned Boston Timber Company since 1949 (a connection which later proved extremely useful during industry shortages of timber). Ridge was also familiar with Brummels, the small gallery founded by Yencken (and Pat Collins) in 1956, which promoted Australian art, and they both lived in South Yarra and had mutual friends.

After the Black Dolphin, Yencken and Ridge started to consider other possible joint business ventures. Initially Ridge suggested a construction company, but Yencken was not immediately interested. The concept of Merchant Builders was evolving when, by chance, Yencken met Graeme Gunn during a course in Chinese at The University of Melbourne. This led to Gunn becoming Merchant Builders' sole consultant architect until 1969. Importantly Yencken, Ridge and Gunn all had an association with Robin Boyd, and all were keen to introduce innovative housing forms to Australia. Gunn had worked for Boyd in 1961 before finishing his architecture course. Boyd also had an involvement with Merchant Builders; when, shortly before he died, Boyd drew up plans for a large development proposal for LendLease in Lum Road, Glen Waverley.

The Yencken/Ridge/Gunn alliance drove the heart of Merchant Builders' ambitious housing agenda. The company addressed a perceived gap in the Australian housing market

for well designed, good quality, medium cost project housing. Initially hand chosen architects were given considerable leeway by the founding directors to interpret this vision, especially Gunn in the company's early years.

The directors decided that Merchant Builders would retain responsibility for construction within the company (rather than the more usual practice of subcontracting) and that construction would be based on a modular design system, initially modules of three feet. Gunn's first three houses, The Terrace, The Courtyard and The Studio, introduced many elements which characterized Merchant Builders most successful project housing work: modular planning, interior zoning, attention to the interior/exterior relationship and passive energy features.

Early Merchant Builders house designs exhibited features not found in the displays of competing project housing companies in Victoria, including:

- > The influence of Robin Boyd's early project house designs, especially the standard window sections he designed for Stegbar Windowalls;
- > The use of heavy timber beams combined with distinctly 'Scandinavian' elements, such as timber stains, earthy colours and textures;
- > An integrated design approach which respected the contribution of a range of built environment disciplines, especially landscape design;
- > An emphasis on the relationship between internal and external spaces; and
- > An 'Australian' aesthetic favouring native planting, the use of contemporary Australian timber furniture (mixed with kilim rugs) and Australian works of art in display houses.

One of the starting points for Gunn's designs at the first Merchant Builders display village at Glen Waverley, on which Gunn and Yencken agreed, was that the houses should be places in which they would like to live.² Gunn recalled how his approach to zoning would work for a household in The Studio, The Courtyard and The Terrace houses:

Previous page

Photograph of Winter Park, 2024, photographer John Gollings.
© 2024 John Gollings.

Opposite

Overall site plan for development at Winter Park, High Street, Doncaster, 1969, architect Graeme Gunn, client Merchant Builders. Gift of Graeme Gunn.
© 2024 Estate of Graeme Gunn.

Continued

Most houses then had three bedrooms at one end, a lack of privacy and a kitchen remote from the living room. The kitchen is the fulcrum with children. The Merchant Builders houses gave parents some privacy with an ensuite, which was also a cloakroom for guests. This approach allowed the houses to be zoned. We worked with the notion of courtyards as private rooms outside and created a hierarchy of spaces up to the entry zone. The open plan became the facilitator - it created more choice. It provided a sense of space different to other houses at the time. Rooms became the confluence. The conventional, minimal ineffectual spaces for corridors were changed to usable spaces.³

Many of these features later found expression in Gunn's Two-Storey, Split level, and Cellar houses.

In addition to the individual project house range, Merchant Builders commenced constructing town housing in the late 1960s. These were small developments of between four to eleven dwellings grouped in linear fashion along a central or side driveway. The award-winning 76 Molesworth Street, Kew, designed by Gunn is perhaps the best known example. Yencken recalled that the town housing work demonstrated to Merchant Builders that advantages usually associated with the detached house—privacy, family, car security and garden space—could also be provided in denser forms of development. The townhouses proved to be an important transition to the larger group housing projects: Elliston, Winter Park and Vermont Park.

Winter Park (1969–1981)

Winter Park is frequently cited as an excellent cluster scheme even though it was developed under the Strata Title Act. The grouping of Gunn's earliest project house designs—The Studio, The Terrace, The Two-Storey, The Cellar, and The Courtyard—clearly demonstrated the attributes of more flexible siting. The 20 houses, sited over 2.43 hectares, had their own private outdoor areas as well as access to a central parkland space - a direct contrast to surrounding typical subdivision patterns.

With exactly the same density as a standard subdivision and without loss of carports, service courts and effective private gardens for each house, we have been able to include many pleasant and interesting innovations, and, above all, provide nearly an acre of common parkland in a development a little over four acres.⁴

Yencken was very influenced in the development of grouped housing by William Whyte's *Cluster Development*, which described a number of American grouped housing schemes as well as the problems perceived by residents and officials. He found that much of the American experience was repeated at Winter Park. As Yencken put it:

We had every type of problem in getting the local authority to agree, we had protests from neighbours who thought we were going to debase their property values. It's rather surprising in retrospect because the housing at Winter Park today would be infinitely more valuable than ... the housing surrounding it.⁵

Centre
Pamphlet titled
"Houses by Merchant
Builders," c. 1977,
graphic designer Bruce
Weatherhead, architects
Gunn Hayball Pty Ltd,
client Merchant Builders.
Gift of Robin Cocks and
Peter Carmichael.

MERCHANT BUILDERS HOUSES. BY GRAEME GUNN. AT WINTER PARK.



Each of the five display houses at Winter Park, Doncaster has been designed for Merchant Builders by architect Graeme Gunn.

Built in a cluster setting, they blend perfectly into their surroundings of trees and shrubs. Inside each house, the effect is quite dramatic, with exposed timber beams, space and light.

There's a timelessness about each of these houses that you will recognise immediately.

Every plan opposite can be extended and varied to many needs. Designs can be modified to meet the most exacting requirements.

MERCHANT BUILDERS HOUSES. BY TERRY DORROUGH AND GUNN, HAYBALL. AT VERMONT PARK.



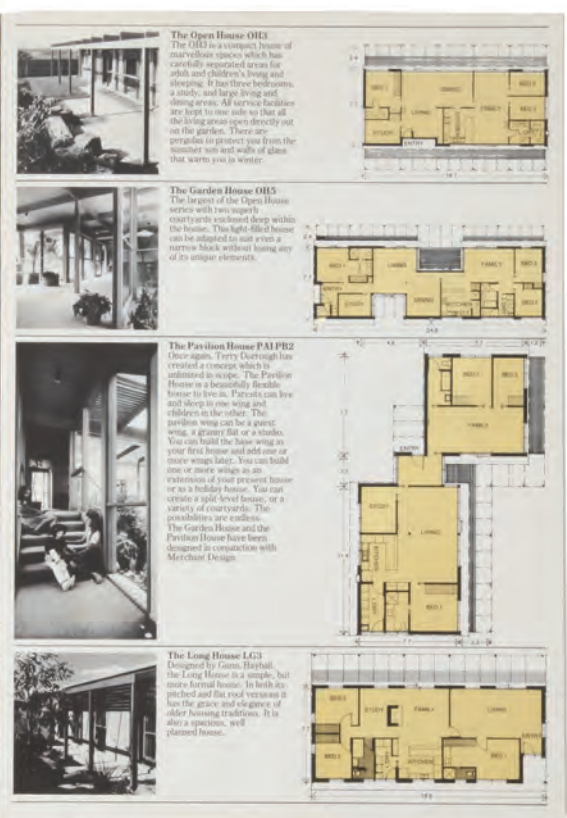
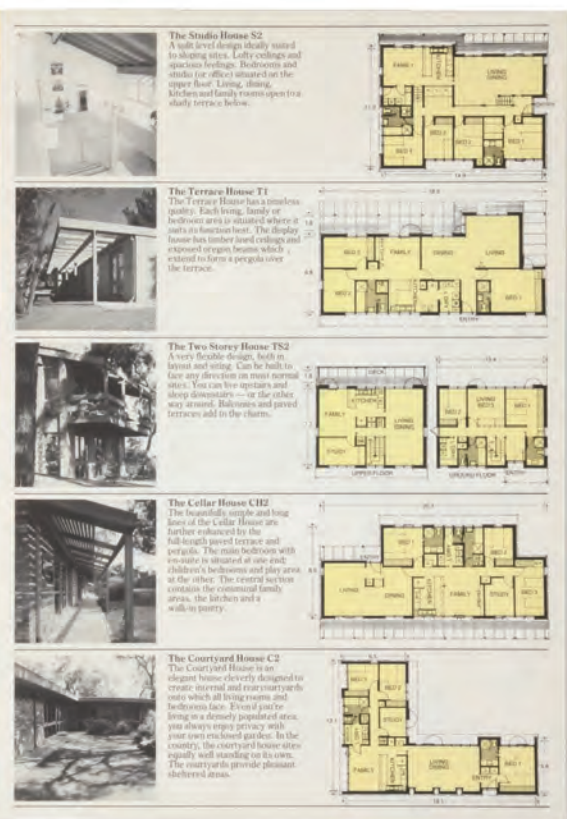
The style and feeling of the range of houses at our Vermont Park display centre is different and exciting.

The Vermont Park houses are open, light filled designs, with timber ceilings, large windows to enjoy winter sun and timber batted eaves to keep the houses cool in summer. Each one has a master bedroom with en-suite and living room area separated from children's bedrooms and family rooms.

Each one makes the most use of space and good design. With special attention to quality at a competitive price.



Every plan opposite can be extended and varied to many needs. Designs can be modified to meet the most exacting requirements.



The enormous difficulties encountered with planning officials, local government and real estate agents over these more flexible subdivisions led Yencken and Gunn to advocate for changes to planning regulations. Their lobbying included the publication of the book *A Mansion or No House*, written with a group of like-minded environmental reformers, which explicitly criticised the constraints imposed by regulations. Performance standards rather than rigid guidelines and a consolidated subdivision act were advocated—and were only achieved in Victoria fifteen years later.

Some of the limitations of the Strata Title Act, for example, meant that verandah-type (but functionless) connections had to be built between the houses. As with the town house schemes, these links emphasised the cars and garaging arrangements from the entry drives although the site as a whole clearly demonstrated the potential advantages of cluster style development.

The pivotal role of Ellis Stones' landscape work should also be acknowledged as part of Merchant Builders commitment to an integrated design philosophy, well before university accreditation of landscape architecture courses in Australia. Gunn and Stones had a close working relationship prior to the first range of project houses, which continued until Stones died in 1975. Anne Latreille, *The Age Gardens Editor*, described Stones' contribution at Winter Park:

In the courtyards Ellis's delicate planting and cleverly placed built-in seats received much acclaim, while his juxtaposition of brick paving, rock work and gravel toppings provided appealing solutions in the public spaces—visitor parking, driveways and the like—that receive little attention in most medium-density developments.⁶

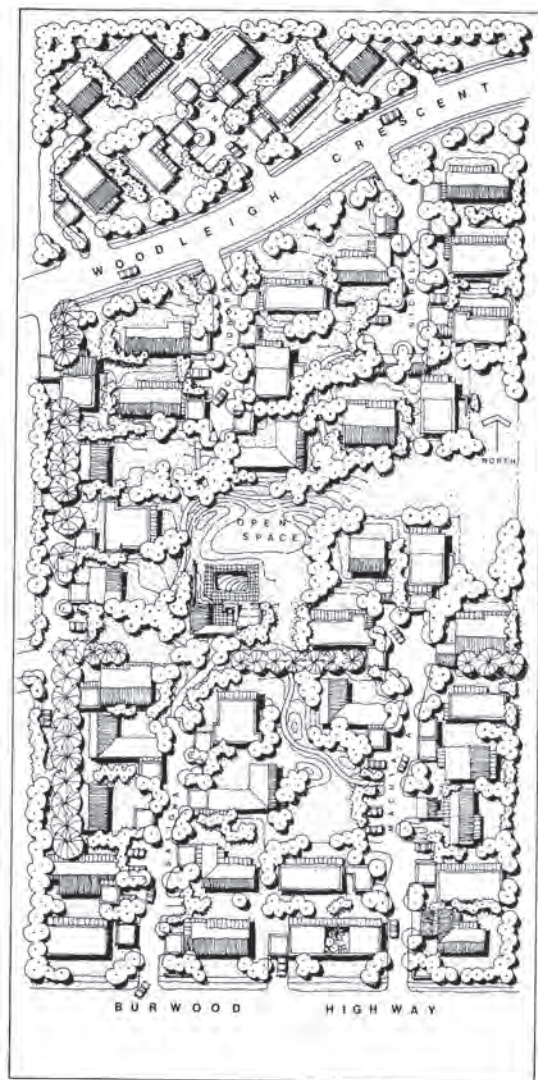
Reviewing Winter Park in 1990 Gunn also felt that:

(although) the motor vehicle has some sense of priority the surfaces work for both vehicles and pedestrians. The juxtaposition of building and landscape still works well.⁷

According to Yencken, the Model Cluster Code of 1975 effectively enabled the requirements of the Uniform Building Regulations to be waived and replaced by performance guidelines for a grouped development. This facilitated more flexible siting, building to the boundary of individual titles and shared landscaped areas and/or provision of amenities. Linking of dwelling units was no longer a requirement.

During twenty-first century visit, it is observable that the central shared park area is still well cared for by residents, and many have chosen to open their gardens completely onto the shared park. Yencken considered the landscape at Winter Park to be amongst Stones' finest work for Merchant Builders, although by 1990 he felt that some of the subtlety of the planting had been lost.

To make the site immediately attractive we deliberately overplanted in order to get an instant effect ... but later residents were always reluctant to take a tree out or to trim the vegetation growth.⁸



Above
Plan of Vermont Park,
"Vermont Park Victoria.
Landscape Australia
looks at 'the alternative
suburbia,'" *Landscape
Australia*, Feb. 1979, 36.
Courtesy RMIT Library.

Overall, many of the initiatives developed at Winter Park informed planning for the larger cluster scheme, Vermont Park, in the late 1970s.

Vermont Park (1976–1980)

Merchant Builders' last large-scale development involved subdividing an ex-orchard site under the newly proclaimed Cluster Act. Vermont Park drew closely on the experience of Winter Park, but with 43 slightly smaller and cheaper houses, flexibly sited over a 9.5-acre site.

This subdivision became the first large scale example of cluster housing built by the private sector in Victoria. Howard McCorkell, a director of Tract, recalled attending the auction of the site with Ridge and pre-planting with Stones prior to development work. (After Stones died during the early work at Vermont Park, Tract assumed responsibility for the subdivision and landscaping concept.) The site plan again incorporated a central park area with club house, barbeque and swimming facilities surrounded by houses grouped around access courts. The plan and facilities demonstrated many of the advantages claimed by cluster advocates. For McCorkell these advantages included the logical siting of buildings well related to each other, planting which was in harmony with the environment, car and pedestrian separation, the rational provision of traffic and service requirements appropriate to residential scale, architectural standards which could be enforced and the preservation and maintenance of open space.⁹ Yencken believed that a better flow of open space was achieved at the higher density Vermont Park, compared to Winter Park, because of the dominant role that landscape architects played from early in the planning process.

Basing their houses on established Merchant Builders design principles, Gunn and Terry Dorrrough were the main architects. Because Dorrrough was working from Sydney and Gunn was now working from his own practice (Gunn Hayball), in-house architects Barry Grey and Leo de Jong were centrally involved in the design work and the necessary customisation for clients. The display at Vermont Park included Gunn's Long House and Corner House and Dorrrough's Two-Storey House, Open House, and Garden House. Dorrrough recalled that part of his brief was to design a cheaper two-storey house than Gunn's then on display at Winter Park.¹⁰

With hindsight, Yencken believed that schemes such as Winter Park, and later Vermont Park, really stretched the limits of a small company and that the slow adoption of medium density forms prevented full realisation of the potential of cluster housing. Many associated with Merchant Builders believed that there was untapped potential in cluster housing forms for subdivision work, including schemes on sensitive environmental and coastal sites.

Gunn's contribution

Architect Peter Carmichael, who designed later houses for Merchant Builders, argued what was special in the 1960s was that companies like Merchant Builders enabled the public to view an architect-designed house when this was still relatively uncommon.¹¹ Gunn also felt that the project houses 'educated and articulated new ideas.'

There is no doubt that Gunn played a central role in Merchant Builders' award-winning reputation, even though he later became somewhat critical of his own early Merchant Builders' work, evaluating the houses as 'plain and slightly uninteresting'.¹²

Gunn also reassessed his approach to house and landscape design:

Little houses now are gestures of poetry and space ... How much diversity of space can be achieved in a building is important. I'm interested in the complexity of the idea and the simplicity of the solution ... The emphasis on landscape is still very strong - the more money spent the more sophisticated the design. [Back] then you would only be able to do the first two metres well.¹³

Although Gunn's close involvement with Merchant Builders ceased after 1969, Merchant Builders' reputation remained associated with Gunn's growing professional standing over many years. Gunn's houses became the basis for later project house designs, company publicity continued to promote his association until 1990, and Gunn continued to belong to the pool of architects favoured by Yencken and Ridge.

The broader legacy of Winter Park and Vermont Park

While Merchant Builders is credited with the earliest examples of cluster housing in Victoria, the optimism to experiment with new urban forms in the 1970s and 1980s was also growing in other states. In *Australian Architecture since 1960*, Jennifer Taylor acknowledged the grouped housing initiatives of Peter Overman in Perth, John Andrews in Sydney, John Devenish in Woolloomooloo (and later South Melbourne and Carlton) and the South Australian Housing Trust. Many agree with Taylor that the local legacy of cluster development is most evident in the design of retirement villages and some public housing initiatives.¹⁴

After more than 50 years, Winter Park and Vermont Park remain celebrated templates for rethinking middle ring, outer ring and regional housing, and still stand out from more commonplace subdivision patterns. Over this time the promise of cluster housing has been expanded by an appreciation of co-housing, which broadens the scope of cluster subdivision.

The major issue that arises in Australia is why housing innovation in grouped, cluster or co-housing projects proceeds at such a slow pace, especially when there are many pertinent local and international examples to draw on. Few private developers are currently prepared to finance and build ambitious schemes, and most variations of grouped housing can be found in intentional communities beyond capital city limits.

- 1 The material in this article draws heavily on Anne Gartner's MA thesis *Merchant Builders: From Reform to Receivership*, Monash University, 1994, later public lectures about Merchant Builders and personal communication with David Yencken.
- 2 Graeme Gunn, interview with author, August 1990.
- 3 Gunn, interview 1990.
- 4 Merchant Builders' description of Winter Park in Ian McKay, et al, *Living and Partly Living: Housing in Australia*, (Melbourne, Vic: Thomas Nelson 1971), 136.
- 5 David Yencken, interview with author, September 1990.
- 6 Anne Latreille, *The Natural Garden: Ellis Stones: His Life and Work*, (Ringwood, Viking O'Neil, 1990), 218.
- 7 Gunn, interview 1990.
- 8 Yencken, interview 1990.
- 9 Howard McCorkell, interview with author, 1991.
- 10 Terry Dorrough, interview with author, December 1991.
- 11 Peter Carmichael, interview with author, November 1991.
- 12 Gunn, interview 1990.
- 13 Gunn, interview, 1990.
- 14 Jennifer Taylor, "Living and Partly Living", *Australian Architecture since 1960*, (Red Hill, ACT: National Education Division, Royal Australian Institute of Architects, 1990).
- 15 In my experience grouped housing and higher density projects continue to be met with financing and planning delays - and often require intense and time-consuming commitment from proponents. A pertinent contemporary example is The Paddock Eco Village in Castlemaine.



A Brutalist Archaeology: Towards The Grampians

Alan Pert



PEER
REVIEWED
ESSAY

ABSTRACT

This paper provokes an alternative reading of a number of Graeme Gunn's projects. Some of his most notable buildings (Richardson House, the Plumbers and Gasfitters Union Building, Baronda and Molesworth Street Townhouses) are often described as Brutalist.

There is no question that Gunn's projects fit with Reyner Banham's 'image' of 'The New Brutalism' as he described it in his 1955 article for *Architectural Review*. However, the Smithsons who first used the term in 1953 and Banham would begin to hold very different opinions about the direction of the New Brutalist project. Banham's 'Brutalist image' becomes an unhelpful label for Gunn and we discover through a series of interviews with him that his interests are more aligned with the Smithsons and those of the independent group (Growth and Form)—in the material qualities of architecture and the aspects of process and making in architectural construction, as well as in New Brutalism as a 'way of life.' Through these interviews, we begin to retrace the formation of Gunn's practice in those formative years, the influence of landscape designer Ellis Stones and the impact of growing up at the foot of the Grampian Ranges in the Western District of Victoria, where the landscape is embedded with personal meaning. In describing the Plumbers and Gasfitters Union for example

we learn that there is no direct link between the sculptural form of the building and the emergence of New Brutalism in Great Britain. Instead, Gunn's references are geological where he asks us to reconsider the building as part of an ensemble of geological references—an "escarpment," "sheer face" and volcanic "cascade." In other words, he is an architect working from a geologically informed perspective and his response to the geology of the remarkable landscape of the Western District of Victoria emerges with a singular clarity in his Plumbers and Gasfitters Union Building.

This paper does not seek to prove that the Brutalist label and previous interpretations of Gunn's architecture are wrong—rather the paper describes a multi-layeredness in his work and an originality born out of a particular place, a specific landscape, and a geological eye. For Gunn architecture becomes a mediation on, through and with the landscape—similar to the great landscape painters, he believes that architecture's role is in revealing landscape.

Eugene von Guérard's painting of the Grampians from 1870 is part of the Hamilton Gallery collection. The view depicted in *Mount Arapiles towards the Grampians* is from the top of the cliffs above and to the northeast of Central Gully. In the words of Dr Ruth Pullin:

On the north side of the gully, he had settled on a vantage point looking southeast through Central Gully towards the Grampians and Black Range. The artist, with his deep and sustained interest in geological subjects, was captivated by the square stepped, blocky forms and overhangs that characterized the monumental Bluff Major. Bluff Major is typical of numerous isolated free standing and undercut pinnacles found on the east facing cliffs, their forms sculpted by wave action during the marine incursion of the late Miocene.¹

Graeme Gunn grew up in Hamilton at the foot of the Grampians. Their dark blue silhouette has anchored his life to the district and childhood memories of camping, hiking, and walking their trails have played a central role in his way of life and in his reading of place. He has long been aware of the imposing sandstone-quartzite formation that rises from the flat Wimmera Plains north-west of the Grampians (Gariwerd). Known as Dyuritte to its Traditional Owners, the Wotjobaluk, Jaadwa, Jadawadjali, Wergaia and Jupagulk peoples, it was named Mount Arapiles by the explorer Major Thomas Mitchell in 1836.²



Right
Mount Arapiles towards the Grampians, 1870, artist Eugène von Guérard. Hamilton Art Gallery Collection.

Opposite
Exterior view, Plumbers and Gasfitters building, 1969–1971, architect Graeme Gunn, photographer Iain MacKenzie. Courtesy Melbourne School of Design/The University of Melbourne.
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Like Von Guérard, Gunn discovered these spectacular geological forms and in fact references Bluff Major, with its dramatic undercut pinnacles and cascades, when explaining the Plumbers and Gasfitters Union (PGU) building's sculptural form – commonly referred to as "Brutalist."³ Gunn suggests that he was searching for an image of permanence, resilience, strength, stability and for a malleable material that would best represent an organization like the Union.⁴ During our many conversations he would make reference to annotated notes on the original drawings of the PGU that refer to the raked section of concrete below the projecting oriel window as a "cascade." Gunn suggests that standing underneath the projecting window ("lookout") facing the "cascade"

was akin to standing under an escarpment or undercut pinnacle in Mount Arapiles, while the projecting staircase ('fragment') to the street was also to be read as part of the ensemble of geological references. These were ideas borne out of the many conversations he and landscape designer Ellis Stones would have about rock formations and the basalt landforms of the Western District. In gardens Ellis Stones would typically arrange for lumps of granite to be partially sunk into the earth as if they had always been there and the PGU similarly appears embedded: the "cascade" literally signals a rock formation erupting from the topography of the city. It is a footing that firmly embeds the building in the land and a site absent of any singular natural feature, where the architecture ends up generating its own landscape.

In the middle of Melbourne's urban, political and social flux Gunn wanted to create solid ground for the Union's community. He had brought a regional reality into the city—a man-made fragment of the Grampians lit by streetlights and with a materiality that has partially fractured the buildings relationship with the city and with regional Victoria. While discussing Pullin's paper, *The Vulkaneifel and Victoria's Western District: Eugène von Guérard and the Geognostic Landscape*,⁵ Gunn shares a similar idea that the Grampians' natural rock forms could acquire the significance associated with human history through their association with built forms such as castles. PGU is, as such, Gunn's castle, but made of concrete—its concreteness has, for over 50 years, defined its Brutalism, which has sent us all on a detour that begins and ends in the writing of Alison Smithson from 1953.⁶

It is often too easy in the context of a linear architectural history to categorise people into styles or movements. Modernism, Post-Modernism, Deconstructivism, Mannerism, Humanism, and Brutalism become oversimplifications and miss the nuances of an architectural idea or influence. Architectural exhibitions also play a catalytic role in the development and discursive processing of architectural ideas, but they too can lead to groupings and categorisations that lead us off in a misleading direction. In fully understanding, the origins of New Brutalism⁷ in architectural terms, it is equally important to understand the parallel practices of its authors. Architect Alison Smithson and critic Reyner Banham were part of the Independent Group (IG), who were a radical group of young artists, architects and critics who met at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London in the 1950s. Among its members were artists Richard Hamilton, Eduardo Paolozzi and William Turnbull, critics and writers such as Banham and Lawrence Alloway, and architects James Stirling, Colin St John Wilson and Alison and Peter Smithson. Their multidisciplinary and collaborative approach was most evident in a series of exhibitions they staged between 1952 and 1956, including *Parallel of Life and Art* (1953) and *This is Tomorrow* (1956). The Smithsons were also associated with Team 10, which emerged out of the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM)⁸ in July 1953. To fully understand the emergence of New Brutalism there has to be an understanding of both the coupling together and

integration of ideas across typical disciplinary boundaries and a holistic reading of their diverse practices. It has been argued for example by scholars that the Smithsons and Banham held very different opinions about the direction of the New Brutalist project. While Banham was more concerned with the 'image' of New Brutalism, the Smithsons were more interested in the material qualities of architecture, the aspects of process and making in architectural construction and in New Brutalism as a 'way of life'.⁹ Retracing the formation of New Brutalism in those very early years is more helpful in a reading of Gunn's work.¹⁰

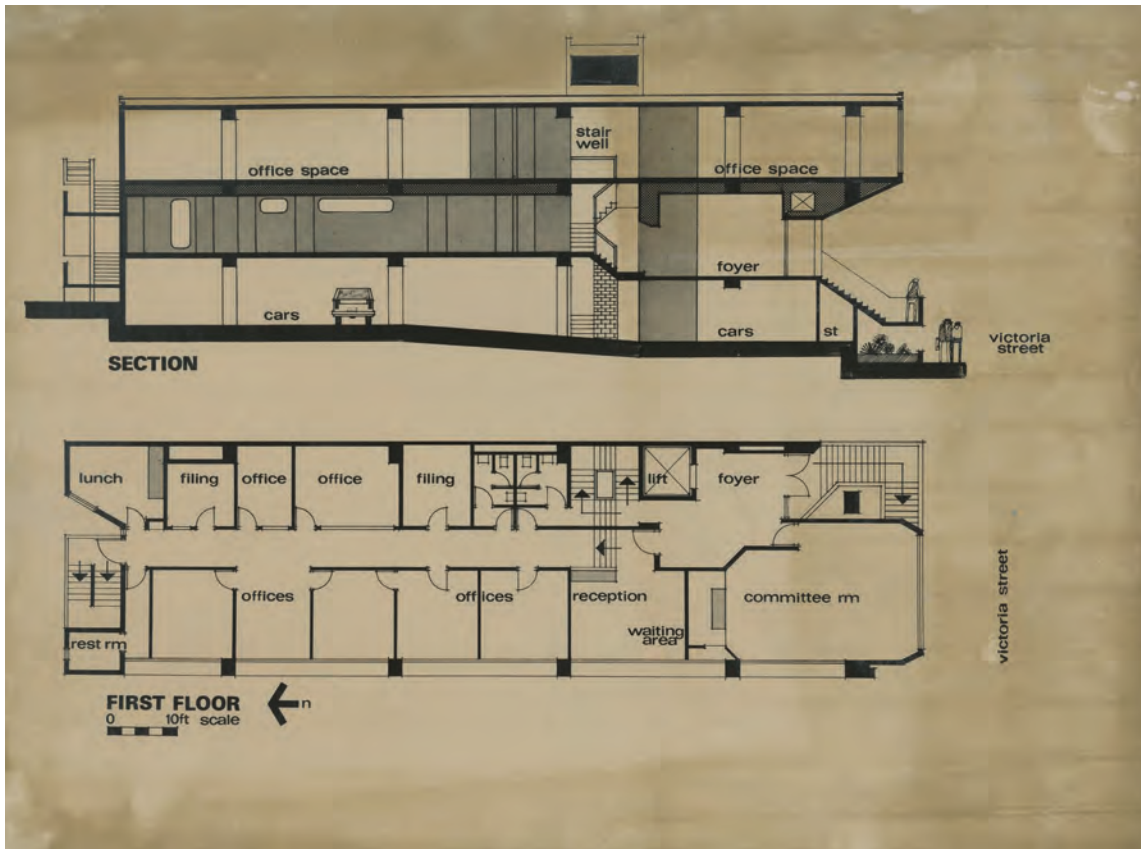
Jerzy Soltan, writing as part of the Team 10 Primer (Gunn's copy) described an urban problem, "among urbanists and urban designers today there is a dangerous tendency arbitrarily to extract a part of the design process from its complex wholeness."¹¹ To define architecture's parameters and responsiveness simply at the scale of the building envelope (Banham's Brutalist image) would, for example ignore the complexity and anticipatory nature of someone like Gunn's work.¹² At a very early stage in his career, Gunn was interested in his projects operating at the scale of a broader territory, shifting architecture's focus from interiority to exteriority—and, in so doing, to engage an expanded environmental context. David Yencken (client and collaborator with Gunn) once suggested that a number of Boyd's houses consumed their landscapes, while Gunn's work manifested itself in total environments.¹³ He would go on to say that Boyd's Walsh Street house could be simply explained through the cross-section, while Gunn's houses had to be experienced to be fully understood. Alex Selenitsch suggests something similar when writing about his experience of visiting Gunn's Baronda—a house built for Yencken (1968–69), "The Baronda plans were an extreme case of the disparity between a built work and its orthographic projection. Just about all of Gunn's buildings that I have visited become different works to the one's that I imagine from the plans."¹⁴

The Shoebridge House (1961), constructed fully in timber, is described as "A Fallen Tree."¹⁵ Named after artist Fred Williams *Fallen Tree*¹⁶ series from 1957, this is also a reference to the site being part of a mature pine forest which extended for two-thirds of an acre, with an elongated plan form that stretched out in an east-west direction through the pine trees. For Gunn, the interior becomes shaped by the unpredictable forces of nature. Such overlapping and dynamic environments pose provocative challenges to design, with Gunn deploying pergolas, deep eaves, sunscreens and verandahs as mediating devices and in-between spaces across several of his projects. He recognised that landscapes evolve through processes of succession and evolution, but suggested that "architecture struggles with such an equivalent."¹⁷ He was in search of a way to allow his buildings to evolve, transform and weather in these expanded environments.

Gunn goes on to suggest that there is a dialectic of different approaches to nature: veneration of nature, imitation and allegory, or designing "parallel to nature ... the more

Opposite

Floor plan,
Plumbers and Gasfitters
Union building,
1969–1979, architect
Graeme Gunn.
Courtesy Melbourne
School of Design/The
University of Melbourne.
© 2024 Estate of Graeme
Gunn.



architects begin to comprehend landscape and context the less their work might stand in opposition to it and the easier it will be to understand our decisions as a continuation of a whole.” He further suggests, that ‘a building should no longer be seen as a thing-in-itself, but rather as a process of ongoing relationships existing in a physical context.’¹⁸ Gunn is fascinated by architecture’s role in revealing landscape and he makes reference to Fred Williams, who, in 1970, would be the first to reprise Eugene Von Guérard painting of the waterfall of Strath Creek in Mount Disappointment (January 1862). Gunn was fascinated by how different artists translated similar landscapes and he describes how Williams painted *Free copy of Eugene Von Guerard’s Waterfall Strath Creek*, translating Von Guerard’s romantic landscape into his own distinctive aesthetic language. A kind of “superimposition” on one hand and “archaeology” on the other. Von Guérard’s waterfall would be reprised many times throughout the 70s and 80s culminating in Imants Tillers painting: *Waterfall (After Williams)*. Tillers would describe the painting as a “mediation on landscape”¹⁹ similar to Yencken’s description of Gunn’s work across a range of projects.

Gunn’s ‘Collective Form’ and Shift in Direction:

Gunn’s Richardson House (1963), Grange Road townhouses (1967), Molesworth Street townhouses (1968), Plumbers and Gasfitters Union (1968) and Baronda holiday home (1968) all share in being labelled ‘Brutalist.’ Whether it be through heritage citations, award citations, building reviews or Judith Trimble’s PhD (1985), it’s a common reference when describing Gunn’s work. The statement of significance for The Plumbers and Gasfitters Union Building states that it, “is one of the earliest and finest examples of the Brutalist style in Victoria ... adopting a tough Brutalist exterior, the building is a bold statement of growing trade union power.”²⁰ Lovell Chen’s Boroondara Heritage Citation of 2005²¹ for Molesworth Street describes

the townhouses as having “Brutalist overtones,” while Judith Trimble’s PhD on Gunn has a chapter titled “*Form-Making: The Excursion into New Brutalism*.”²² The more recent Conservation Management Plan²³ for Baronda by Robertson & Hindmarsh makes the comparison between Baronda and Molesworth Street suggesting, “although of totally different materials ... the architecture of Baronda and Molesworth townhouses are said to be Brutalist in that they directly express the structure and use few, unadorned materials in a very mannered way.”²⁴

The year 1968 is a significant year in the practice of Graeme Gunn not only for the inclusion of a number of seminal commissions but also for an apparent change in direction in his language of design: Molesworth Street in Kew (Townhouses for Merchant Builders), Plumbers and Gasfitters Union (52 Victoria Street, Melbourne), and Baronda House for David Yencken (Nelson’s Inlet, NSW) were all parallel commissions in 1968—they are also some of his most notable works that demonstrate a departure in material language. 1968 was also the year that Merchant Builders commissioned townhouses at Yarra Grove (Hawthorn), Yuille Street (Brighton—Stage 2) and Kensington Close (South Yarra) in addition to 77 project houses at Elliston in Rosanna.

What came before these seminal projects though is important in helping us to excavate the origins of this so-called change in direction. The first townhouse projects were introduced in 1967 with Graeme Gunn’s job register noting Yuille Street in Brighton as the first development followed shortly by 17 Sorrett Avenue, Malvern and then 93 Grange Road, Toorak for John Ridge as Boston Timber Developments. Prior to this his job list was dominated by single house types and mostly for Merchant Builders.

The Yuille Street grouping consisted of eight townhouses delivered in two stages arranged from two-types of Gunn’s



Above
Exterior view, Plumbers
and Gasfitters Building,
1969–1971, architect
Graeme Gunn,
photographer Iain
MacKenzie. Courtesy
Melbourne School of
Design/The University
of Melbourne.
© 2024 Iain MacKenzie.

project houses developed for Merchant Builders (2 x two storey houses and 6 x courtyard houses). Judith Trimble in her thesis notes that the Clifton Brick Company developed a new “coffee” coloured brick for this development and that the continuity of brick walls made it difficult to discern the boundaries of each house. The use of the singular brick material created a bold formal arrangement, and Gunn suggests that this was his first encounter with ideas of a new “collective form.”²⁵

For the next townhouse development at Sorrett Avenue which included nine townhouses and landscaping by Ellis Stones he used the same materials as Yuille Street. Keen to move away from simply rearranging project houses into clusters Gunn developed two entirely new house types for Sorrett Avenue. Three plans were produced from the two new designs: Type A was a two-storey house while Type B was a single-storey I-Shaped house with two private courtyard gardens. Three two-storey houses were, “sited at wide intervals down the long boundary with three small two-storey houses in front and between them.”²⁶ The single storey houses were then situated at intervals along the main driveway. These houses stepped down the gentle slope of the land towards the rear boundary adding to the overall “collective formal arrangement.” By stepping the units and clustering alternate types, the overall composition had a material coherence but malleable formal arrangement which was Gunn’s intention.

The next development was at 93 Grange Road, a development of four townhouses for John Ridge including his own house. Judith Trimble suggests that Grange Road is the evidence of a definite shift in Gunn’s architectural approach, “It is in this project that Gunn begins to show an interest in the imagery of the New Brutalism.”²⁷ Trimble suggests that prior to Grange Road, Gunn had not shown an interest in “highly sculptural” or “roughly finished architecture” while at the same time comparing this shift in his approach with “Corbusian brutalism.”²⁸ Prior to the townhouses Trimble suggests Gunn’s approach was distinctly planar with the exception of some early houses and specifically the “introverted” and defensible Richardson House²⁹ (1963) formed in a flat elevation of concrete block. Gunn however would describe the Richardson House as agricultural in form and detailing—borrowed from the language of early rural homesteads and translated into a suburban context. Trimble also refers to the introduction of the diagonal or forty-five-degree angle at Grange Road suggesting that the “sheering off” of the corners of the two-storey walls is also a reference to Brutalist expression and is about “modelling form rather than in shaping space.” Spatially the townhouses at Grange Road are also unusual as they are designed on multiple levels with staggered walls and with spaces opening and closing to create a sense of spatial generosity in what was a modest floorplate.

In discussion with Gunn about the “shift” that happens through these townhouse projects we begin to excavate ideas that are less to do with “New Brutalism,” they do however have parallels with the Smithsons later writings (1993–97) which discuss ideas of ‘conglomerate ordering’

that emphasised ideas of gradual growth and clustering when they write about *Italian Thoughts*.³⁰ As Trimble correctly identifies these are ideas about “sculptural form” but they are more importantly also experiments in what Gunn refers to as “group” or “collective form”—an idea he suggests that is more aligned to the Metabolists (Fumihiko Maki³¹) than to “New Brutalism.” Gunn suggests that “collective form is more about the entangled relationships between the material, social and psychological dimensions of form”³² and the relationship to the land. The townhouses were in fact experiments—they were trying to solve the problem of grouping people and families together on shared ground and the task for Gunn was working with the nexus between the physical environment and society.

Gunn references David Yencken’s 1971 lecture at Monash University³³ where Yencken talked about the need to have a feeling for the whole (an alignment again to the principles of Team 10) and a grasp of design principles for groups of buildings, “we must go back and learn a new appreciation for the whole and for the relationship to the land. We must learn to impose a dynamic order, where the important elements are carefully designed and strictly controlled, and the rest can be filled into the general pattern.”³⁴ Yencken also referenced historical examples of town buildings, Greek villages or settlements in North Africa with common spatial and massing qualities as well as their use of a singular material, usually stone. It would be 20 years later that the Smithsons would describe Siena’s La Grancia di Cuna (granary building) as a ‘conglomerate’ building that has “the capacity to absorb spontaneous additions, subtractions and technical modifications which in no way disturb its sense of order.”³⁵

Gunn suggests that the townhouse experiments of 1967 were as such about the consistent use of basic materials and construction methods as well as minor variations (to avoid monotony) in physical expression – the repetitive use of certain visual elements such as walls, projecting balconies, small cantilevers, car ports, pergolas and what Trimble describes as the “diagonal cut” are synthesised into a “collective whole.” Gunn suggests these townhouses are about the act of making a composition and about having visual consistency or a kind of master form that is malleable and can move into ever new states of equilibrium as people’s lives change or alter. More significantly, when he describes the relationship between the built-form and sloping terrains of Sorrett Avenue and Grange Road he again makes reference to sandstone ridges, rock formations and escarpments along with childhood memories of exploring the Grampian Ranges with their smaller granitic hills and outcrops. The image is no longer static or Brutalist, instead it is gentler and geological.

Following the completion of the Grange Road townhouses as well as the Rockman house in South Yarra (next door to the Boyd house) Gunn managed to convince Yencken and Ridge to allow him to experiment with concrete block at Molesworth Street in Kew, citing an interest in the work of Luis Barragán who had designed several homes among the volcanic rocks of El Pedregal, San Angel in South Mexico between 1944–53. Gunn had previously used concrete block

in his Richardson House (1963) and while working for Grounds Romberg and Boyd (GR+B) in 1961. While Boyd was overseas Gunn was left in charge of the McNicol House at 19 Gordon Grove, South Yarra. Unlike the Richardson house which was a smooth flat face of concrete block with no depth, the McNicol house had a bold temple-like frontage made up of a series of three-story piers and a projecting blockwork stair with some similarities to the rear of the Plumbers and Gasfitters Union. Gunn was specifically interested in the contrasting light and shade that the piers created, and he felt the concrete block offered greater opportunity for sculpting a sense of depth when shadows were cast across the elevations.

The heritage statement for Molesworth Street references an aesthetic “that alludes to Brutalism.”³⁶ Some might suggest the houses are austere, but Gunn would describe the grouping more akin to a series of standing stones or dolmens set within a sloping topography and landscape of eucalypts. He also refers to the work of artist Robert Smithson but more as a post-script than a direct influence at the time. Gunn’s approach in partnership with Ellis Stones was to treat landscape and natural elements as an integral part of the architecture, but rather than fading deferentially into the terrain that surrounds them, the houses are confident and emphatically constructed, utilising a limited palette of materials. The use of simple geometric forms juxtaposed against the landscape and topography creates a dynamic spatial experience which Gunn describes as similar to the expansion and contraction borne out of walking in the Grampians – the sense of contraction that happens as you enter a gorge followed by a pinnacle.³⁷ Despite the obvious modernist lineage, the houses are also unusually primitive—set within a bluestone shared driveway, the atmosphere is neither urban or suburban and feels more like a form of rural settlement. If Barragán’s architecture was rooted in the Mexican village, Gunn’s was similarly rooted in regional Victoria and specifically the rural settlements that occupy the plains at the foot of the Grampians and towards the Budj Bim cultural landscape.

At El Pedregal, Luis Barragán had placed a cluster of houses between remnants of the lava that had cooled centuries before. Native grasses crept up through the cracks and when the seasonal rains came, the landscape transformed, bursting with colour as various plants began to bloom. Barragán integrated the unique geology of El Pedregal into his architecture and left much of the land open and unbuilt. His approach to the site’s geology is often described as a mediation on—rather than defiance of—the lava deposits and as previously suggested. Yencken describes both Gunn and Stones as having a similar mediated sensibility:

For too long we have believed that the only landscapes that matter are treed landscapes with open spaces contained and controlled to limit the horizon and in doing so create a physical container of appropriate scale. Spaces to which man related. Spaces in which he perceived himself as the Corbusian unit of measure. Some Australians have discovered and appreciated the arid treeless plan and the monochromatic grasslands,

uninterrupted except by undulations or the pale mauve silhouette of a mountain range on the horizon. There are few people, however, who possess the industry, skill and sensitivity to position elements within this form of landscape in a complementary manner³⁸.

The above quote by David Yencken and Graeme Gunn continues with references to Sea Ranch on California's North Coast and again with Luis Barragán's work as examples where there is a conscious effort to integrate the natural and the constructed. They describe Barragán as an "intermediary" capable of extending and relating the natural and built environments and Yencken similarly describes Gunn's ability to portray a subtlety of relationships in his work as a form of mediation. Yencken credits Ellis Stones for teaching him and Gunn of the "transcendent quality of Australian landscape which sometimes defies cultivation and is not always able to suffer human intrusion without disastrous results."³⁹

It was Gunn who introduced Ellis Stones to Yencken. Gunn had met Stones while working at Robin Boyd's office in 1961. Ellis Stones had cold-called the office with two boxes of 35mm slides of his work but there was little interest from Boyd or the other employees. Gunn took the time to listen to Stones and the experience would have a lasting impact on the young Gunn who was still trying to find his own language of design: "it was not until I met Ellis Stones that I was able, after eight years of architectural study to convert my dreams to a working program that had any sense of reality."⁴⁰ It was his meeting with Stones that helped Gunn to reflect on a childhood growing up in the foothills of the Grampians. Stones' practice was defined by a search for a way in which to integrate an emerging Australian consciousness through landscape—his use of native plants, rock forms and water extended the peculiarities of the Australian landscape, and he reshaped Gunn's thinking about how to introduce architecture to its specific context.

The Paradox of the Plumbers & Gasfitters Union

Barry Bergdoll's paper for *Places* (June 2018), "Marcel Breuer and the Invention of Heavy Lightness,"⁴¹ describes the paradox in Breuer's work and the shift that takes place in Breuer's office in the 1960's with monumental buildings clad in large blocks of stone or with exteriors of reinforced concrete:

The Whitney Museum of American Art (1964–66), described repeatedly in the press as a kind of "fortress" for art. From "floating on air" to a "fortress" — how can one address this radical reversal, the seeming paradox of a career with such a profound change of heart? How could this architect who had made the pursuit of lightness the sine qua non both of his personal aspirations as a designer and also of the very nature of modernity become one of the greatest form-givers of the aesthetics of weightiness associated with poured-in-place and precast concrete, and with International Brutalism in the 1960s and 70's?⁴²

When considering the evolution of Graeme Gunn projects, we might perceive a similar "radical reversal", or "seeming

paradox" when we consider his early experimental projects or his prototypes for Merchant Builders' and make comparisons with the exposed concrete volumes of The Plumbers & Gasfitters Union completed in 1971 – his chiselled and sculpted edifice at the top end of the city of Melbourne. Similar to Breuer, many ideas remained constant throughout Gunn's career—the material and structural experiments and the pursuit of lightness. Breuer's interest in lightness can be traced back to his Bauhaus training—especially in his early encounters with lightweight aluminium furniture.

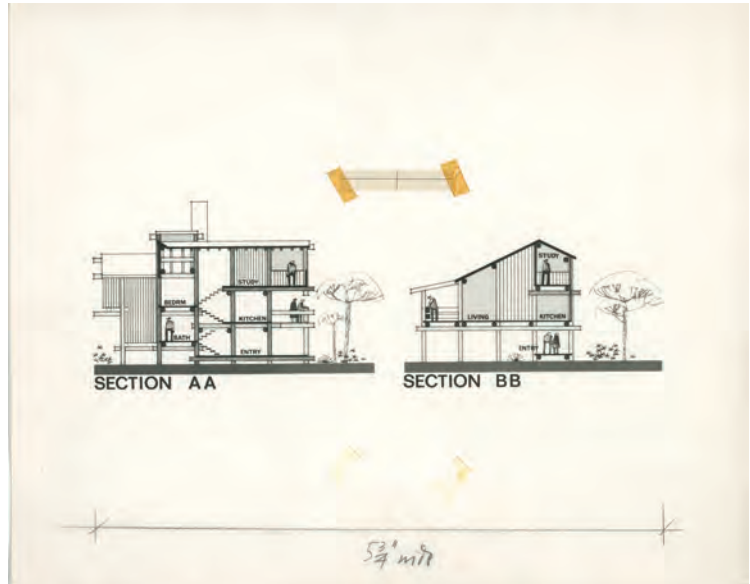
For Gunn, however, it is a very different encounter that starts with the volcanic plains of the Western District between the Grampians to the Northeast and Buj Bim to the Southwest, where lightness for Gunn was expressed in the lightweight barns, grain sheds, hay sheds and shearing sheds that pepper the landscape.

The flatness, the golden fields and the eucalyptus trees of the long road to-and-from Hamilton are broken only by the steep jagged escarpments of the Grampian's and for over 90 years Gunn has observed the stacked layers of sandstone and fault lines which rise to 250 meters above sea level. The natural phenomena are as such a more appropriate reference than the work of the Smithsons in London or Marcel Breuer in the US. Standing on the edge of Mt Abrupt looking over the plains beyond you can see the entire geological tale spoken by the rocks and it makes you wonder if concrete was not an option whether Gunn would have suggested sandstone for the Plumbers and Gasfitters Union.

Robin Boyd once suggested that the materiality was wrong and that it should have been a building "in steel," but as Gunn explained, it was less about an assemblage or a machine and more about a "malleable mass" that could evolve and patinate over time—indeed—even programmatically, as Gunn explained, the building was designed and engineered to take an additional two floors – much like a fault line evolving or a tree growing and expanding. The many natural formations across the Grampians with their unique topographies, sculptural character and cultural meaning create strong reference points for Gunn's approach to a new gathering space and headquarters for the Union. Defined by environmental actions of wind, water, sun, and land shifts that have sculpted the landscape through centuries, similarly this is a building that had to weather the flux of an organisation, the shifting political winds as well as the physical and social changes taking place in the city it serves.

Gunn's "Brutalism" at Baronda, 1968–69

Gunn designed a holiday home in the Mimosas National Park, north of Tathra, NSW for David Yencken, Baronda, in 1968–9. It was planned as five split-levels over three stories—a timber post and beam structure consisting of pressure-treated spotted gum. Originally designed free of windows or doors (a basic shelter), with spaces framed by the structural members punctuated with apertures to the stringy bark interior and exterior cladding. Both timbers were sourced from local forests and treated at Sir Roy Ground's and Mr Ken Myers nearby Penders treatment plant.



Above Left
Baronda House,
NSW, 1968–1969, architect
Graeme Gunn. Courtesy
Melbourne School of
Design.

Above Right
Elevation,
Baronda House, NSW,
1968–1969, architect
Graeme Gunn, unknown
photographer. Courtesy
Melbourne School of
Design. © 2024 Estate
of Graeme Gunn.

Below
Photographs of Baronda
House, NSW, 1968–1969,
architect Graeme Gunn,
unknown photographer,
courtesy Melbourne
School of Design.

While the appearance of Baronda is of a vertical assemblage of cantilevered spaces and independent rooflines, there is also a strict 2.75 metre grid of timber posts that create a sense of order across the site. The floors and decks are laid with boards of 150mm thickness spanning 1350mm—the only imported elements used in the construction were the roof and glazed doors and negotiated glazed windows that were not included in the original design.

The house is sited on the edge of Baronda inlet and approximately 150 metres from the coast. The idyllic combination of landscape coastline and inlet encouraged the development of a building character capable of responding sympathetically with the natural environment. To reduce the amount of landscape despoilation, constraints were placed on the introduction of external services to the house area. Water storage is via the roof, cooking and lighting from porta gas and telephone service was non-existent back then. The dilemma of optimising inlet and sea views on the one hand and protecting the visual and structural characteristics of the shoreline on the other was resolved by siting the house inland and elevating the main internal and external living area 2.7m above ground level. This resolution also effectively dealt with the hazard of sand flies prevalent at ground level during the summer months.

In contrast to the obvious heaviness and closed-form appearance of the Plumbers and Gasfitters Union Building, Baronda started from an idea of “openness,” which was significant in Yencken’s brief for the house and its occupants who prescribed to the notion that recreation was intrinsically associated with the natural environment. Gunn was an obvious choice for Yencken who for the proceeding few years had been working with him on the early houses of Merchant Builders. Yencken pointed to Gunn’s interest in ideas of “collective” and “open form,” “ambiguity” and “incompleteness” which were in direct opposition to the static rigidity of pure modernism. Ambiguity in plan was in fact stated in the design brief for a Merchant Builders house,⁴³ and can be seen in the resolution of Baronda’s footprint.

Gunn and Yencken shared an interest in leaving “a spatial and formal margin in architectural projects for the user’s individual expression;”⁴⁴ they both were opposed to designs which they defined as “closed form.” Gunn’s interest in “open-form” parallels with the writing of Oskar Hansen who proposed to treat architecture as a framework, a “passé-partout,” that frames and exposes the visual richness of the everyday life: “the art of events.” Gunn like Hansen sought out a design solution that welcomed and encouraged transformations, leaving room for the unexpected to play out and for a level of informality at Baronda. Yencken and Gunn in their paper described the house as:

a concentrated form, elevated to make the best of the marvellous views and to obtain relief from the dreaded sand fly. Its planning arrangement is reflected in a series of interlocked platforms, each stepped 1370mm above each other and achieving a modicum of privacy through the vertical separation provided. It is a tree house which offers views of the inlet and the coastline, and which suggests a relationship with the tree tops ...

The house is somewhat fractured in form and because of its elevation and exposed belly it induces upward glances ... (it uses) a limited range of materials in a simple and straightforward, nearly crude manner ... an appropriate result in terms of natural surroundings.⁴⁵

Like the Plumbers and Gasfitters Union, Baronda is a building which speaks to Reyner Banham’s uncompromising frankness about materials.⁴⁶ Much of the impact of the building also comes from what he calls, “ineloquence, but absolute consistency of its component parts.”⁴⁷ Additionally, if toughness and primitivism were the hallmarks of ‘New Brutalism’ then Baronda and the Plumbers and Gasfitters Union both naturally fit into the historians and the critics repository of comparative ‘brutalist’ buildings. Both buildings have an “immediately apprehensible visual entity,”⁴⁸ that at first glance contributes to the ‘image’ of ‘brutalism’ but the buildings also require a double take. There is a multi-layeredness in Gunn’s work and the coherence of both buildings as visual entities gives way to multiple readings and references.

There is no question that Gunn’s work fits with the ‘image’ of brutalism in its materiality and honesty in exhibiting its structure. All of his “structures exhibit an excess of *suaviter in modo*, even if there is plenty of *fortiter in re* about them.”⁴⁹ The brutality conveyed in the first take of Gunn’s projects always gives way to a second glance that unearths a more gentle and mediated agenda (a lightness). Boyd in his book on Kenzo Tange (1962) refers to the Japanese term, *yoyoi* (quiet and well-balanced, repose, delicacy) and *jomon* (force, coarseness, callousness)⁵⁰ Gunn’s ‘bloody-mindedness’ is always tempered by the building’s relationship to the land. Banham’s reference to buildings with a gentle assertiveness (not Brutalist) is extended by Robin Boyd in 1963, when he suggests that “there is not much brutalism in”⁵¹ and that a new generation of younger architects (including Gunn), “were.”⁵² We might then ask ourselves where Gunn’s work fits (if at all?) in this middle path?

Gunn’s architecture is anything but the manifestation of a recursive, architectural argument, rather it appears to be profoundly open to the world, not least in its engagement with questions of landscape, environment, ecology, and lifestyles. What binds these is the ‘existent’ as a criterion for decision making. Boyd in his declaration (“there is not much brutalism in Australia”) offers an alternative which he refers to as “Creative Realism.” While Gunn does not speak to Boyd’s ‘label’ directly, he believes that with any context - whether a city or an open landscape—that there is a powerful reality, history and multi-layeredness that has to be acknowledged first—one which we can only make minor additions or changes to in order to mediate its next phase of evolution. For Gunn, creativity must consist of more than just new ideas or wild imagination; it should also have realistic, enduring consequences which would seem to align with Boyd’s specific points.

But rather than fitting into the lineage before him Gunn strives for a distinctively different “Creative Reality,” where he envisions an entirely new mode of life (and reality) appropriate to the modern age. The result is a

portfolio of projects that have changed over time, much like the landscapes of Hamilton he returned back to in later life. Ideas of impermanence and incompleteness are as such reflected in Gunn's work—his buildings were built to be interchangeable and adaptable, both in time and space – rather than the implantation of a transposable and monolithic International or brutalist style. Gunn's work first and foremost seeks out truth to the surroundings. His work is in no way oppositional - he is adamant about understanding and respecting those that have come before him, and he believes his decisions are less about a lineage of styles or movements but instead part of a continuum. Rather than a linear idea of modernism, brutalism, or creative realism he describes this again as an idea of multi-layeredness—where attitudes become form and where form is something that is discovered.

How to Read a Gunn Building

With Gunn every project is an overlay on past projects and to 'excavate' the archives requires an architectural historian as much as it needs a landscape historian and possibly even an art historian.

Rather than sitting somewhere between Banham's *suaviter in modo*, or *fortiter*, the Japanese terms, *yoyoi* and *jomon* or alternatively Boyd's "effete elegance or brutal honesty"⁵³ maybe we need to find an alternative middle ground between the landscape romanticism of Eugene von Guérard and the distinctive abstraction of Fred Williams.

Writings, both published and unpublished, notes on scraps of paper, diagrams, and photographs— all form part of the historical archive of architecture ... for others it is the image—the representation of architecture in the mass media.⁵⁴ With the Smithsons we need to excavate beyond their built works and their writings by exploring the exhibitions and curatorial agendas of the Independent Group and what came before them. 1953 for example saw the emergence of Team 10, the opening of the exhibition, *Parallel of Life and Art* and the words "New Brutalism" appear in print for the very first time. But what role did *Growth and Form*⁵⁵ (1951) the exhibition by artist and founding Independent Group member Richard Hamilton have on this new decade long collaborative practice that ran in parallel to the Smithsons built works? Can their proposal for Bath University (1980-90)—where they proposed a cluster of 14 buildings to be built over time (offering maximum growth and flexibility)—be linked back to Hamilton as a young artist, "probing the philosophy of form"⁵⁶ and the ideas of *Growth and Form*?

Gunn's Plumber's and Gasfitters Union owes its appearance chiefly to the use of concrete while Baronda's log construction defines its 'as found' appearance. Both buildings were designed and engineered to grow—the PGU was engineered to take an additional two levels so the organisation could expand over time while Baronda's 'expansion' was envisaged as a vertical spiral of platforms that could grow upwards above the trees. Gunn and Yencken were as such pushing ideas of growth and form very early in their collaborative journey and well before the Smithson's reference to "conglomerate ordering." Gunn's

Dawson Grove house (1961) in Frankston is often dismissed as a counterpoint to his 'Modernist' and 'Brutalist' traditions. Referred to as spatial and formal outlier with its spiral plan hugging the sites topography it becomes significant in a rereading of Gunn's work through the lens of *Growth and Form*. Gunn for example describes Dawson Grove's spiral form as a "dynamic event" with similarities to Baronda with its ascending spiral journey and unusual form the result of the dynamic spatial event.

Gunn's archives are spread between RMIT Design Archives, the State Library Victoria, his own personal estate in Hamilton and captured through Judith Trimble's PhD as well as through eight years of written and verbal correspondence with me while writing a book about Merchant Builders and a monograph on Gunn. There are many unpublished notes, articles and files which are still being worked through and which will hopefully help us position his work. Gunn was plugged into a rich network of people who all shaped his thinking and changed the way he observed architecture, life, and art: Ellis Stones, David Yencken, Grazia Gunn and Fred Williams are just a few that he has spoken of, and we must understand these encounters more fully if we are to understand Gunn's own architectural history and how we should read his buildings. Maybe the Smithsons, (yet to be published) archive manuscript, "A History of Three Natures of Layering"⁵⁷ (1981) when eventually published will help us to reveal a more nuanced reading of Gunn's work than that of "New Brutalism". The Brutalist label and the previously," published article or photo of the built work takes us only so far."⁵⁸

ENDNOTES

1. Dr Ruth Pullin, *Deutscher and Hackett* website (Sydney 14 September 2022), accessed July 2024 <<https://www.deutscherandhackett.com/auction/lot/mount-arapiles-towards-grampians-1870>>
2. Pullin, *Mount Arapiles Towards the Grampians*, 2022.
3. Lovell Chen, *Plumbers and Gasfitters Union Building Heritage Impact Statement*, December 2024, accessed July 2024, https://www.heritage.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0021/694110/202311-PG_HIS-pdf.
4. Graeme Gunn interview with author, October 22–23, 2022. Alan Pert and Graeme Gunn are working towards a monograph and exhibition of Gunn's projects. Regular meetings and field conversations have taken place between 2018–2024. The field notes are currently archived at The University of Melbourne's Faculty of Architecture Building & Planning and at Gunn's private estate in Hamilton.
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6. Alison Smithson's statements appeared in *Architectural Design* (December 1953): 342. The first reference to the New Brutalism was made by Alison Smithson in 1953. It appeared in her description of a project for a small house in Soho, the structure of which was to be "exposed entirely, without interior finishes wherever practicable."
7. Alison Smithson, *Architectural Design* (December 1953): 342.
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11. Jerzy Soltan Harvard, "Lecture, 1967" in Alison Smithson, *Team 10 Primer* (London, UK: Studio Vista Limited, 1968): 14.
12. Graeme Gunn, interview with Alan Pert I=June 2022. "Incompleteness" as a theme in Gunn's projects.
13. David Yencken interview with Alan Pert, March 2016.
14. Alex Selenitsch (April 1998) "Baronda Narratives," unpublished, Faculty of Architecture Building & Planning, University of Melbourne. Source: Graeme Gunn's private archives, Hamilton.
15. Judith A. Trimble, "Graeme C. Gunn, *A Critical Art History 1961-81*," (PhD diss., Visual Arts Department Monash University, 1985): 25
16. Graeme Gunn confirmed that the "Fallen Tree" title was a reference to Fred Williams in an email to Alan Pert on August 8, 2024. Fred Williams was a friend of Gunn's and Williams would go on to paint the Baronda series in 1975 while staying at Baronda for a few days. One of the paintings is still part of the Williams estate while the other is part of the British Museum collection: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_2003-0330-8.
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19. Lucie Reeves-Smith, "Imants Tillers, Waterfall (after Williams)," 2011, catalogue 41 in *Important Australian + International Fine Art, Melbourne July 15, 2020*, accessed September 25, 2024, <https://www.deutscherandhackett.com/auction/lot/waterfall-after-williams-2011>
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24. Robertson & Hindmarsh, Baronda.
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26. Judith A. Trimble, "Graeme C. Gunn, *A Critical Art History 1961-81*," (Doctor of Philosophy, Visual Arts Department Monash University, 1985): 144.
27. Judith A. Trimble, "Graeme C. Gunn, *A Critical Art History 1961-81*," (PhD diss., Visual Arts Department Monash University, 1985): 144.

28. Trimble, *Graeme C. Gunn, A Critical Art History*.
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31. Maki, Fumihiko (1928–2024) in *The Oxford Companion to Architecture* (Oxford University Press, 2009). *A Dictionary of Architecture and Landscape Architecture* (2) (Oxford University Press, 2006).
32. Graeme Gunn, interview with author, September 2022.
33. David Yencken, “Architecture Tomorrow”, transcript, lecture given at Monash University, April 28, 1971, (unpublished), 9. Collection: University of Melbourne ABP Archives.
34. Yencken, “Architecture Tomorrow.”
35. Daniel Kiss and Simon Kretz, “Introduction to Relational Theories,” *Relational Theories of Urban Form, An Anthology* (Basel: Birkhauser 2021), 231.
36. Lovell Chen, 2005 Heritage Citation for City of Boroondara.
37. Graeme Gunn interview with author, September 2022.
38. David Yencken & Graeme Gunn, “Perception, expectation and experience,” *Man and Landscape in Australia: Towards an Ecological Vision: Papers from a Symposium Held at the Australian Academy of Science, Canberra, 30 May-2 June 1974:* 314–330.
39. David Yencken & Graeme Gunn, “Perception, expectation and experience.”
40. Graeme Gunn, unpublished essay, October 8, 2020, Source: Graeme Gunn’s Private Archives.
41. Barry Bergdoll, “Marcel Breuer and the Invention of Heavy Lightness,” *Places Journal*, June 2018, accessed June 2024, <https://placesjournal.org/article/marcel-breuer-and-the-invention-of-heavy-lightness>.
42. Barry Bergdoll, “Marcel Breuer and the Invention of Heavy Lightness.”
43. Merchant Builders Archive, Faculty of Architecture Building & Planning, The University of Melbourne
44. Graeme Gunn interview with author, June 2020.
45. David Yencken & Graeme Gunn, “Perception, expectation and experience”, *Man and Landscape in Australia: Towards an Ecological Vision: Papers from a Symposium Held at the Australian Academy of Science, Canberra, 30 May–2 June 1974*.
46. Reyner Banham, “The New Brutalism,” *Architectural Review*, 1955.
47. Banham, “The New Brutalism.”
48. Banham, “The New Brutalism.”
49. Banham, “The New Brutalism.”
50. Philip Goad, “Bringing it All Home,” *Fabrications*, 25:2 (2015): 198. Goad refers to Robin Boyd’s book *Kenzo Tange* (New York, Braziller, 1962).
51. Goad, “Bringing it all Home.”
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Gunn Dyring Architecture and Urban Design

Sophie Dyring and Stuart Harrison

In 2009, early-career architect Sophie Dyring began collaborating with Melbourne architect Graeme Gunn. Within a year, they formalized their relationship, forming the partnership Gunn Dyring. Gunn, then 74, had a distinguished career, working with many of Victoria's leading architects, producing a remarkable body of housing projects, and revolutionizing architectural education at RMIT.

In this interview transcript, architect Stuart Harrison speaks with Sophie Dyring about her six years working with Gunn, covering their collaborations on architectural, master-planning, and feasibility projects. The discussion also reflects on the lasting influence of Gunn on Dyring's work and beyond. The interview was recorded at Winter Park, one of Gunn's celebrated cluster housing projects in Doncaster, on June 24, 2024.



Stuart Harrison (SH) **SH:** We're here at Winter Park, a Graeme Gunn cluster housing project, with Sophie Dyring. Tell us a bit about Winter Park and what you can see and feel right now.

Sophie Dyring (SD) **SD:** Well, right now, Stuart, just behind your shoulder, I'm looking at two lorikeets eating nectar from the Silver Princess, while the sun is bursting through clouds hitting the mature gums. Some of these [gums] were kept on the site when it was developed in 1971. So, we are enjoying the late afternoon sun at Winter Park.

SH: In winter.

SD: In winter. Couldn't be more beautiful, absolutely.

SH: Birds chirping, and yes, you are right. We're surrounded by some overwhelming sense of landscape, but we're not in a park; we're in a housing project. And around this we can see the relatively low scale, but sort of beautifully integrated dwellings that form part of this. And really we're in the main central space of Winter Park.

SD: Yes.

SH: And it is one of a series of courtyards here.

SD: Just one of the consolidated, shared spaces. The twenty dwellings here have smaller private open spaces, and they have these large shared open spaces. That's the key principle of cluster housing.

SH: Yes. It's a combination of different types of private open spaces, and this green communal space right in the middle. And there's several of these big courtyards floating around. And we're on a hill. In fact, just to the west here, we can see back to the city [Melbourne].

SD: Yes, from that second courtyard, there's a great view to the city skyline which can be enjoyed from a communal table like the one we are sitting at.

SH: It is one of Graeme Gunn's most celebrated projects here at Winter Park. But we're going to start by talking about you, Sophie. How did your journey in architecture and landscape start?

SD: Well, architecture I completed at RMIT in 2001, but landscape architecture I didn't begin until after my relationship had begun with Graeme. After beginning practice with Graeme, I went back to study landscape, and he was very influential in that decision. And I finished that in 2014.

SH: And were you always keen to go into private practice as opposed to working for others?

SD: I was, yes, interested [in private practice] as a student and as a graduate. And then as time goes by, when you're employed, it just seems less and less likely.

SH: You think it would be harder now to leave working for someone and setting up a practice?

SD: I think when you're a student and early graduate you have very little understanding of the industry, so working for yourself seems easy. As you work for others and get more understanding of how it is to run a practice the opportunity to have your own seems less likely and harder to achieve.

SH: And so those periods between graduating in 2001 from architecture at RMIT and before you started practice with Graeme, who did you work for?

SD: After graduating I did some time at Bruce Henderson in a commercial practice environment,¹ before heading off overseas for about six months. When I returned to Melbourne, I'd decided that I wanted to work in design firms, so I first got a position, and I did a couple of years with Paul Morgan and after that a couple of years with LAB Architecture Studio (LAB) prior to meeting Graeme and going out on my own.²

SH: And with LAB, I remember you were travelling around quite a bit, working in really a global way.

SD: Yes, I was very fortunate. When I was at LAB, I was employed there to work on their local projects, Melbourne projects, because most of the studio was working on international projects and

competitions, but I did have an opportunity to work on an apartment building we had in Beirut, under Don Bates.³

SH: What did you take away from that time at LAB?

SD: This question takes me back to thinking about my naivety about our industry, like wanting private practice as a student. I learnt at LAB that international travel is fun and exciting initially, but the shine can wear off. Here it was also reinforced to me that you can work smart and not hard. This lesson being learnt in my student days.

SH: Yeah, great, so it's a good combination of design-led firms, big global firms and commercial firms. And then the relationship with Graeme Gunn's practice. How did that emerge from contracting to wanting to enter practice with Graeme? Graeme having had many practice partners in the past.

SD: He has been in practice with many people – Gunn Hayball, Gunn Williams Fender. He's had several different incarnations of Gunn et cetera. The practice together came about as I had designed a house for my mum, and we didn't get the planning permit, so we went to VCAT [Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal] and through that process I met a colleague called Tim Biles and he encouraged me to go out on my own, so I did with his help. I had a desk space and was doing some small renovations for friends of his. Graeme had an architect leave his employment, so Tim introduced Graeme and me.

I did a contract for Graeme. I documented a house in Hamilton, the Slorach House and then Tim suggested that we might formalise our relationship. So, we worked together for another year and enjoyed working together so we became Gunn Dyring.

SH: And obviously as an intergenerational practice. Graeme is in his senior years now, and you're a mid-career architect. What do you think the benefits of the model are of an intergenerational practice?

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Sophie Dyring and Stuart Harrison at Winter Park, Doncaster, 2024, photographer, Stuart Harrison. Courtesy of Stuart Harrison.
© 2024 Stuart Harrison.

Opposite
Slorach Residence, 31A Skene Street, Hamilton, 2009, architect Gunn Dyring Architects and Urban Designers, photographer Aaron Tester.
© 2024 Aaron Tester.



SD: Well, for me and my experience with Graeme, I think he's a very generous man and he taught me some really critical lessons. One of them was how to have robust conversations between two colleagues and it not to get personal – how to not let it get in the way of what you're doing together. I found that really valuable. He had all the years of practicing and me, fifteen years ago, was probably taking things a bit more personally. He taught me to not be precious.

SH: So what year did Gunn Dyring Architecture and Urban Design, as it was known, start and what year did it finish?

SD: In 2009 we worked together and then Gunn Dyring started properly in 2010. And we finished in 2014.

SH: And so you've already hinted around landscape and understanding of landscape being one of the things

you learned from your time with Graeme, and that in fact led on to you studying landscape architecture and becoming an architect and landscape architect, a powerful combination. What are other things do you think you learned from your time working alongside Graeme Gunn?

SD: Well, one huge influence and legacy really that Graeme has left with me is planning spaces in a better way than I was before I met him, by increasing the amenity for people. Mostly on a domestic but also on an urban scale.

For instance, we did a lot of residential work, and Graeme's done a significant amount over his career, many projects recognised by his peers. In planning a house, I know I feel more confident doing that because of the work I've done with Graeme and learning beside him. He was a terrific mentor

generally and specifically for that skill, and of course in the integration of architecture with landscape.

SH: But I think we should talk a bit more about integration with landscape. The industry these days talks more about the importance of landscape, but some practitioners still see it as something that sits alongside buildings. How do you integrate landscape into residential design, and multiple housing design? What are the ways in which landscape and architecture begin to talk to each other?

SD: Well, Graeme saw them as equal disciplines and the landscape design would begin as the architecture began. So they were truly integrated in that sense. It wasn't architecture first and then landscape second. With Winter Park and also Vermont Park, those estates by Merchant Builders had Ellis Stones working on the landscape design alongside Graeme and the architecture.⁴ I think it's why his projects are successful. It's because the two design disciplines have equal footing.

SH: I think that's absolutely right. Just to return to this idea of the intergenerational practice - would you recommend this as a model? You were a relatively young architect at the time. Would you recommend this model to other young architects?

SD: I would, I think, depending on the two individuals, you can bring very complementary skills to your collaboration. So, I had enthusiasm, drive, and energy, and Graeme had the years under his belt of running a practice, mentoring people, and client relations. He also had incredible design skills and a loyal client base. But for it to work each partner needs to be engaged.

SH: Yeah, I mean, it's not like you were straight out of Uni either. You'd worked for a long time; you had a reasonable level of experience on a variety of types. So maybe young architect is not the right term. Maybe it's early career versus later career. It's a fascinating model. I think it does have many benefits. What was the work that you were doing with

This page

John Paterson, David Yencken, and Graeme Gunn, *A Mansion or No House: A Report for UDIA on Consequences of Planning Standards and Their Impact on Land and Housing*. (Melbourne: Hawthorn Press, 1976): 102-103

Opposite

John Paterson, David Yencken, and Graeme Gunn, *A Mansion or No House: A Report for UDIA on Consequences of Planning Standards and Their Impact on Land and Housing*. (Melbourne: Hawthorn Press, 1976): 17



Graeme Gunn? How was it different to the work that you've been working on before?

SD: The biggest difference was it was my work rather than someone else's. The practice I was at immediately before going out of my own and then meeting Graeme was LAB. The portfolio I worked on there was large commercial and institutional projects, here and overseas. There was no smaller scale residential work. And prior to that, Paul Morgan, he's really honed his portfolio around educational and institutional projects. The work Graeme and I did was nearly all residential, on multiple scales, from precinct master planning all the way down to renovation work on Merchant Builders' houses, and everything in between.

SH: The legacy of the Merchant Builders' projects continuing ...

SD: Yeah, I think they're well loved by their owners.

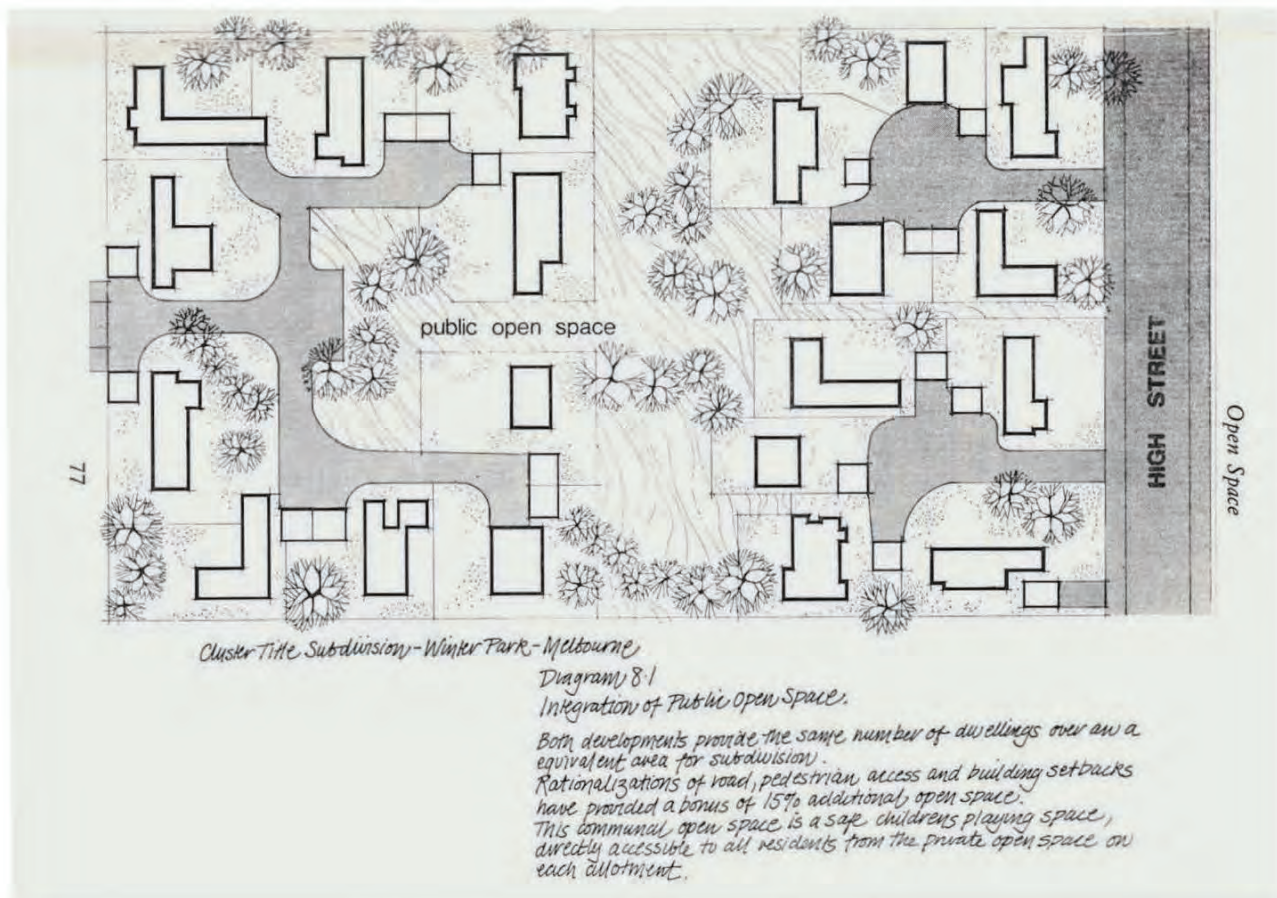
SH: And I think what's successful about the Merchant Builders' houses is that they are desirable by many when they come onto the market. They really are truly valued as that thing that doesn't happen very often now - a kind of high amenity but simple good design that has broad market appeal. We seem to not be as good doing that today as we were in that Merchant Builders period.

SD: No, and I think another major influence in my career post Gunn Dyring is having a real, I guess, love for project homes, simpler homes, but doing all the important things correctly, those that influence the

quality of the amenity. Orientation and cross ventilation, shading, integration with landscape, all those things that make a beautiful home, not necessarily the finishes and fixtures you throw at it.

SH: Well, let's talk about the work you've done since Gunn Dyring. You set up your current practice, Schored Projects, in the years after finishing working with Graeme. And coming out of the experience of working with Graeme, was it clear to you how to practice, what sort of work you wanted to do and how you wanted to do it?

SD: Yes. Graeme became semi-retired, which was why Gunn Dyring in the end morphed into Schored Projects. He was in his eighties and was interested in other hobbies outside of



architecture. I'd recently finished my Master of Landscape Architecture. I'd also started introducing social housing projects to Gunn Dyring. I had a real drive to go in a certain direction, and I was wanting to ramp up and Graeme was wanting to ramp down. The direction for Schored was born in Gunn Dyring. I see a lot of Graeme's influence in the work I do. The retention and amplification of landscape features, connecting to landscape through site planning and view lines, playing with domestic language and rational planning.

SH: And you're right, Schored has worked extensively in the social housing space, and you can see the legacy of Gunn Dyring in that work, I think. Particularly because this type of work doesn't happen so much anymore, but where you do have the

ability to innovate in housing tends to be in some of those social, public, and other forms of supported housing projects. I want to return briefly to us sitting here at Winter Park. Do you think Graeme Gunn understood something about place and work that has taken others a lot longer to understand?

SD: Yes. I think Graeme had some deep understanding of place and thinking about that now, I believe that may have come from him growing up in the Western District with a father who was a builder. He was surrounded by beautiful landscapes and I suspect that gave him a strong appreciation of the land and therefore a strong connection and understanding of place.

ENDNOTES

1. Bruce Henderson Architects established in 1977.
2. Lab Architecture Studios, firm of architects and urban designers based in Melbourne with Offices in London and Shanghai. Paul Morgan Architects, established in Melbourne in 1997.
3. Eden Gardens, Beirut, Lebanon, architects, LAB Architects, (2007).
4. Ellis Andrew Stones (1892-1975), Australian Landscape Architect and a conservationist whose work and ideas influenced approaches to landscaping in Australia.

Vale Dr Graeme Gunn AM (1933–2024)

A compassionate agent for change who reshaped the Australian suburb with his project houses, townhouses and cluster developments, dies at 91. His work is as relevant today as it was when he started working with Merchant Builders in 1965 – he will be remembered as a formidable advocate, mentor and caretaker of our environment through a portfolio of projects that demonstrate architecture’s responsive and fluctuating relationship with landscape, politics, culture, and the environment.



Graeme Gunn, Hamilton, 2023, photographer, Alan Pert. © 2024 Alan Pert.

Dr. Graeme Cecil Gunn AM, Hon. DArch (RMIT), LFAIA passed away peacefully on Tuesday October 1 in Hamilton, the town where he grew up. He was born in Geelong (second oldest of five brothers) and moved to Hamilton on August 6, 1935, two years after he was born. He moved back to Hamilton in 2018 following the death of his second wife Suzy a’Beckett Boyd (1954–2016). Son to Amy Ella Williams and Athol William Gunn, he continued to work right up until his death—the proposal for a new Hamilton Gallery in the heart of the town owes much to his vision and his advocacy over the last five years.

Graeme or “Gunny” to his very close friends spent his last six years in what he called his “bothy” overlooking a large pond and nestled amongst over 1000 indigenous trees planted across two 13-acre blocks by his brothers Noel and Murray Gunn in 1978. The “bothy” was designed and built by Graeme as an idea for a prefabricated prototype for remote areas and it sits on a site that is also home to two other Gunn houses designed for family in 1982 and 2005 as well his own studio where he was drawing and painting while still practising in his later years. Over 172 species of birds have been recorded across the estate by Murray Gunn who continues to log these on a regular basis.

Hamilton is important — it’s the town where Graeme and his four brothers grew up at the foot of the Grampians — between the 53 miles of mountain range and the Budj Bim cultural landscape. The mountain ranges’ distinctive geology and one of the world’s most extensive and oldest aquaculture systems have anchored Gunn’s life to the district, and childhood memories of exploring the area have played a

central role in his way of life and in his reading of place. His father was the local builder nicknamed ‘Gable Gunn’ for his distinctive extending ridge lines that no doubt influenced Graeme. Hamilton is also where Graeme developed a reputation as an accomplished athlete and footballer (captain of Hamilton High School football team) as well as a career in the army where he was nicknamed “Gunner Gunn” as a member of the Beaufort Gunners. He joined Hamilton firsts seniors in 1951 when he was 18 and had stints at Melbourne and with Preston in his early twenties.

After a period of working for his father, Graeme set off for Melbourne to study architecture full-time at the Royal Melbourne Technical College (now RMIT University) in 1956, but he cites a visit to Peter Muller’s Whale Beach House in NSW in 1960 as the first time he understood the potential of architecture. Muller for Gunn had achieved a certain architectural romanticism which was evident in many of Gunn’s early projects. But it was Muller’s deep respect for the natural environment that would ultimately give form to Gunn’s thinking.

Gunn was part of a new generation of architects to emerge in the early 1960s but there was an originality in his approach that evolved as a mediation on, through and with the landscape. Like the great landscape painters he believed that architecture’s role is in revealing landscape and when this was not possible, for example in his Plumbers & Gasfitters Union Building (1968), its role was to somehow generate its own landscape. He worked for a short time in the office of Grounds, Romberg and Boyd (GRB, 1960–62) and at the same time started working on his own commissions — his first project, the Shoebridge House, that he referred to as an “echo of a fallen tree” (named after Fred Williams “Fallen Tree” series of etchings) was featured in Robin Boyd’s *The New Architecture* as part of *The Arts in Australia* (1963) and this recognition by his mentor led to a number of new commissions.

After leaving GRB in August 1962, Gunn completed a series of single-family houses including the Richardson House (1963–65) that won the R.V.I.A Bronze Medal for a single house in 1966. Gunn also found common ground with the thinking of the late David Yencken. Together with builder John Ridge they took on the challenge of the Australian suburb with the launch of project housebuilder Merchant Builders (MB) in 1965. Gunn and Yencken would also launch Nexus as an interior design and furniture making division within MB in 1967. The year 1968 was a significant period in Gunn’s practice not only for the inclusion of a number of seminal commissions but also for an apparent change in direction in his language of design: Molesworth Street in Kew (Townhouses for Merchant Builders), Plumbers and Gasfitters Union (52 Victoria Street, Melbourne), and Baronda, a house for David Yencken (Nelson Inlet, NSW) were all parallel commissions in 1968. They are also some of his most notable works that demonstrate a departure in material language where he was experimenting with timber and concrete as a counterpoint to his brick houses for MB. 1968 was also the year that Merchant Builders commissioned townhouses at Yarra Grove (Hawthorn),

Yuille Street (Brighton – Stage 2) and Kensington Close (South Yarra) in addition to 77 project houses at Elliston in Rosanna, named after landscape designer, Ellis Stones.

Gunn and Stones first met at GRB in 1961. But it was the partnership with Merchant Builders that cemented their friendship. In a recent conversation, he suggested that “it was not until I met Ellis Stones that I was able, after eight years of architectural study to convert my dreams to a working program that had any sense of reality.” This meeting with Stones helped Gunn redirect his gaze back to the landscapes of the Western District and a childhood growing up in the foothills of the Grampians. Ellis’s practice was defined by a search for a way in which to integrate an emerging Australian consciousness through landscape. His use of native plants, rock forms and water extended the peculiarities of the Australian landscape, and he reshaped Gunn’s thinking about how to introduce architecture to its specific context. Gunn would often state that context was 50% of a project. Recognising that landscapes evolve through processes of succession and evolution he then suggests that “Architecture has no such equivalent.” For Gunn the immenseness of the Grampian Ranges, the flatness of the surrounding plains, the tree as a spatial device and the idea that architecture is part of an expanded environment are omnipresent. These are the things that stayed with Gunn when he left Hamilton at the age of twenty-three to move to the city. They are all in a constant dialogue throughout his projects and have defined the soul of his creative work while also formalising his constructions.

Gunn went on to produce over 20 house types, six townhouses, flats, four cluster developments (Elliston, Winter Park, Vermont Park and Baranduda), a school, market and ski lodge for Merchant Builders before taking up his role as Head School of Architecture and Building at RMIT, (1972–1977) and then Foundation Dean of the Faculty of Architecture and Building at RMIT, (1977–1982). Gunn had been Chairman of the RAIA Education Committee when he took over as Head of School but it was also a period where a new environmental consciousness was starting to unfold. Under his leadership, a fragmented school became a faculty, but it was his interests in landscape and the environment, borne out of his close working relationship with Ellis Stones that would have a direct impact on the redesign of the curriculum — he transformed the school from a technically based training model to a ‘matrix’ that integrated the study of social and environmental values in the process of architectural design. He also made sure that students were a large part of the decision making. As Granville Wilson states in the centenary history of RMIT, ‘this was typical of the man, for he had an aversion to the cult of the hero and institutionalised authority. He believed that architectural education should be a constantly evolving thing, and that if it stopped coping with change then it should close down.’ Under Gunn’s new direction ‘field stations’ for teaching and research were established at Highlands, one on Mount Hotham and one on Phillip Island. These ‘field stations’ were to form part of the pedagogical approach where you could learn in the studio,

workshop or ‘in the field.’ At the same time these new research centres would attempt to connect higher education research with grass-roots projects. Gunn also established the ‘Practice Group’ again as a way of connecting staff interests to community. Under his leadership RMIT became the first course in Australia to integrate the environmental sciences and social sciences and the first teaching laboratory for the Science of Ergonomics was also established. The impact of Gunn’s leadership has had a lasting impact on RMIT and the architectural community — Gunn brought Peter Corrigan to RMIT after meeting him in New York in 1973 but he also brought in Rodney Wulff and Steve Calhoun from MB to help establish the first undergraduate course in Landscape Architecture in Victoria. Shortly before he stepped down as Dean he also appointed Jim Sinatra who would become a lifelong friend and collaborator.

As well as holding these academic roles, Gunn was also Vice-President of the Victorian Chapter of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (1965–72), Chair and Member of Juries on Design Excellence RAIA (NSW & VIC), a member of the Melbourne Metropolitan Board of Works Residential Planning Standards Committee, a member of the Cluster Housing committee and a member of the Vic Theatre Committee.

Gunn’s work with Merchant Builders led to commissions from the National Development Commission (N.C.D.C) in NSW and Canberra including houses at Evatt (1971–72), houses at Spence (1973–75) and sixty townhouses at Emu Ridge (1975–81) — all designed to accommodate future change in internal and external spaces. He produced 37 offices for the Statewide Building Society and would play a significant role in the refurbishment of the Melbourne City Baths as well as the rebirth of Prahran Market (1971–81) and Moonee Ponds Market (1979). His job list has over 1300 projects ranging from community health centres, libraries, police stations, schools, ski-lodges, swimming pools, theatres, the Chelsworth Park Pavilion (1975), Royal South Yarra Tennis Club (1976), Torquay Surf Life-Saving Club (1970) and TarraWarra Vineyard (Stage 1, 1983 and extension 1989). His list of private residential commissions includes, the Richardson House (1963–65), Rockman House (1967), Dobyn House (1968), Brookes House (1969), Robson House (1970), Scroggie House (1976–78), Redlich House (1977), Besen House (1983) and the more recent Slorach House (2007–09) in Hamilton. Many of these projects were also delivered in partnership with collaboration constituting a fundamental element of Gunn’s career. He would go on to form partnerships with Len Hayball as Gunn Hayball (1972–1982) and then with Karl Fender and Bill Williams as Gunn Williams Fender (1982–1990) completing Portland Aerodrome (1979–84 with TRACT) which was featured in *Domus* (August 1985) and *Architectural Review* (1986).

Keen to redress the generally poor reputation of kit and prefabricated housing in Australia, Gunn was also instrumental in helping Merchant Builders expand into kit house development in 1971. He would then develop the ‘Four Seasons’ range for MB which were prototyped as a cluster of four in Lorne in 1986. These coastal houses would

lead to Bower House Pty Ltd which was formed in 1992 as a partnership with Bruce Weatherhead and Ken Milne to launch a series of bespoke Gunn, designed houses — this range of simple plan houses were fabricated in a factory, deconstructed to wall and floor panels, flat packed for transported to site for assembly.

Based on the ‘Bower Houses,’ Gunn was then asked to design a group of twelve houses for the Australian mission in Dili, East Timor as part of the Australian Embassy Compound. The houses would accommodate key public servants of the Australian mission. The houses were fabricated in a factory in Brisbane and shipped in sections. The independent roof structure was manufactured in Darwin.

Gunn’s early interest in retrofit and refurbishment saw him establish the Largga Partnership with Grazia Gunn, Andrew Reed, Len Hayball, Ross Ramus and Jean Miller in 1977. They pooled resources and purchased the Maples warehouse and three terrace houses in Millswyn Street, South Yarra. Rather than seeing the warehouse demolished they established the collective to oversee the restoration and retrofit into apartments and terraces. Gunn then established a practice with Sophie Dyring in 2009 and was also appointed as VicUrban’s principal design advisor.

Gunn has been awarded many significant architectural awards including his Honorary Doctorate in Architecture from RMIT in 1996, the Australian Institute of Architects (AIA) Architecture Gold Medal in 2011 and the 2001 Presidents Award for Lifetime Contribution to Victorian Architecture. He has been a leading proponent of medium density housing and has played a key role in framing design guidelines for Government policies relating to land use and building development.

While others before Gunn had tackled the suburban challenge nobody had opened the way for a more inclusive view of suburban architecture and changed the course of their subdivision in such a short space of time. When others were ripping up trees to make way for suburban houses, Gunn was carefully choreographing his cluster developments and townhouses to accommodate and celebrate the tree as a spatial device. His suburban legacy is more relevant today than ever as we consider issues of affordability, construction and densification. In the 1960s and 1970s Gunn broke the mould of modernism as it was playing out across the state and during a 60-year career, he has become one of Australia’s most understated but most important architects. He saw architecture not as some lofty idealised practice but as a practice that embraces and is rooted in everyday life. At the same time within this fascination for the everyday he was able to see things from a very different vantage point and there was a sense of magic in the way he translated the everyday into an architectural idea.

In opposition to static rigidity of pure modernism Gunn’s architectural career can be defined by an interest in ideas of “open and collective form”, “ambiguity” and “incompleteness” as a way to introduce the undefined,

informal, subjective and processual element into architecture. This approach manifested itself in the participation of for example Merchant Builders clients to the process of design and the possibility of further adaptation of the executed project to their changing needs. In other words, Gunn has argued for leaving, “a spatial and formal margin in architectural projects for the users’ individual expression” and this can be found in every domestic floor plan that he produced.

Gunn’s work is a reminder of what is possible. His life and career were an entanglement between space, place, people and site. The traces that he leaves behind, help us to understand that the purpose of building (architecture) is to make a site become a place—but they are also a guidebook and a way forward for our suburbs. Today, we seem to have lost our way in the production of the built environment. Our cities and suburbs are built for profit, not for people, and Gunn spent a career trying to counter this. There are limited alternatives or innovative models available on the market, yet we only have to look at Gunn’s portfolio of project to find some of the answers to our current problems. When so many were simply offering a critique of the suburbs, he offered a way forward and a new model of subdivision that sacrificed private space for shared space. Gunn was genuinely attempting to engage in suburbia as a site of a rich and diverse range of histories and cultures. His radical subdivisions are now rarefied specimens that have become akin to finding a fossil in a peat bog for many architectural historians who bemoan their near extinction.

With Merchant Builders he was attempting to reorientate societal expectations and all that the ‘dream’ evoked but Gunn, Yencken and Ridge were battling an ideology of not just physical shelter, but financial shelter that viewed the common backyard as unpredictable and risky — they had created a spatial financial paradox (owned and shared) and everything a mortgaged owner occupier was being encouraged to avoid by the ‘market.’ Beyond his focus on the suburbs Gunn was also advocating for retrofit and reuse long before it became mainstream. His paper for the ANZAAS conference in 1980 where he starts by suggesting, ‘The purpose of this paper is to highlight the opportunity which exists generally in our large cities, to convert industrial buildings and warehouses into housing of an imaginative kind.’

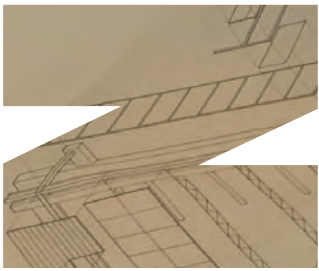
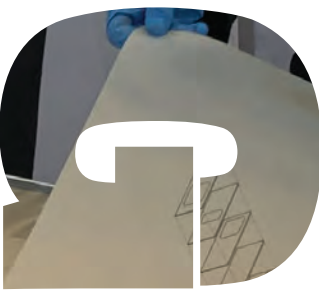
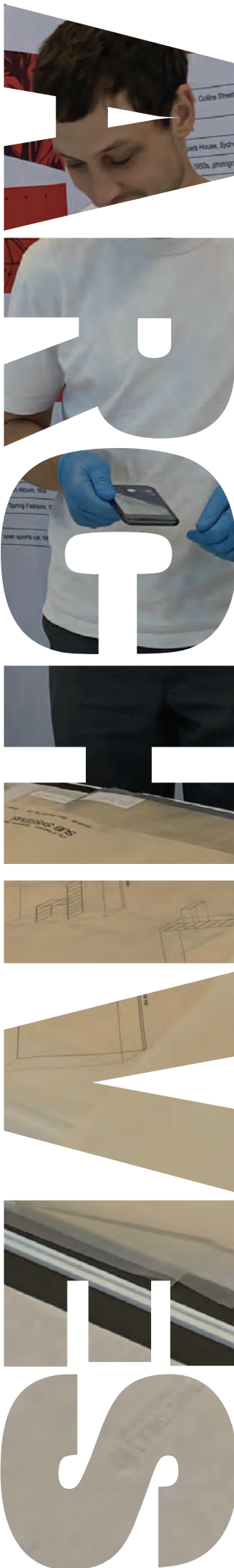
Gunn’s architecture and philosophy aspire to timeless values while remaining authentically modern. Sophisticated and yet primitive, his buildings exist somewhere in the ambiguous territory between high art and ordinary life. Free of stylistic insistence, his buildings appear to be generated solely by the circumstances of site, climate, and the clients’ needs and budget. Unlike others who were always looking overseas for answers, he transformed types and spatial principles from his regional and rural upbringings into a modern but distinctly Australian language. An intuitive designer, Gunn’s greatest influences were the vernacular architecture of the Western District which he reinterpreted with a modernist sense of composition—what he described as a search for an “informed informality.” It was a design

vocabulary that was recognisably his but somewhat difficult to categorise.

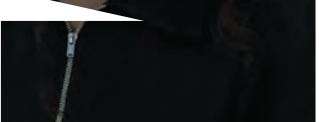
Witty, generous, and equally obsessed about his field and his native Victoria, Gunn was 91. His health has been declining for a few years and nine months ago he lost his power of speech but not his ability to communicate through writing and drawing. A forthcoming book will capture a collection of 125 of his drawings — they are Gunn’s way of representing the slightly hidden, invisible and humorous events that ran parallel to his practice. In March 2025, we will publish a comprehensive history of Merchant Builders with the book, *This is Not Subtopia!* Hamilton Gallery will also be staging an exhibition of Gunn’s work in March 2025 to coincide with the launch of the MB book. Gunn has also been working with me on his own monograph over the last few years and this will be published later in 2025. What you can’t do is measure Gunn by his buildings alone — you measure him in education and in dialogue and making architecture relevant. This was also why he was such a marvellous companion for conversation and, as many have attested, such a great mentor and teacher. He always saw the bigger issue. That was his strength.

Gunn was married twice. He is survived by his brother Murray Gunn (92yrs) and his three children, Cullen and Charlie from his marriage to his first wife, Grazia Gunn and Lucy a’Beckett from his marriage to Suzy a’Beckett Boyd. He has three grandsons and one granddaughter.

Alan Pert
October 7, 2024



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This Page
 Christine Phillips and Tom Muratore with the Graeme Gunn collection, RMIT Design Archives, February 2020.

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RMIT School of Architecture and Urban Design

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