Home Magazines and Modernist Dreams: Designing the 1950s House

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and

'A Cliff of White Cleanliness': Decorating the Home, Defining the Self

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You know when you enter the ideal house of the 1950s. Its rooms resist clear divisions with screens, planters, exposed flues; its ceilings tilt under butterfly roofs; a new ‘science of colour’ seeks to achieve specific emotional states; light, moulded furniture suggests life suspended in process rather than status weighed in repose; windows become broad expanses of glass, establishing continuities between the house and life around it rather than regularising divisions between home and world. At the end of the decade, *Australian Home Beautiful* provided a check list of features and a few key words (‘module’, for instance) for readers still needing some help in distinguishing the ‘modern’ from the ‘estate agents’ contemporary’. A modern house, for example, recognised (in their ordering) ‘the more informal way of life’ characteristic of post-war society; it acknowledged ‘the change in conditions made possible by the use of electricity and mechanisation’; ‘the disappearance of domestic help’; ‘the increased need for quiet and privacy’; ‘the advent of the automobile and its influence on our pattern of living’; ‘the high cost of construction today’.\(^1\) At the beginning of the fifties one of the key exponents of the modern home in Australia, a hero in the defence of the functional modern against provincial regulation, offered a more succinct, evocative summation of its features. ‘Space captured is dissolved’, Harry Seidler proclaimed in 1951, in ‘transparent plastic expression’.\(^2\)

In the accompanying paper Alastair Greig has argued that post-war modernism in domestic architecture, especially as it was presented in magazine journalism, was not so much a coherent aesthetic philosophy awaiting realisation, or an instrument of ideological intervention serving vested interests, as the product of a deep housing crisis which had been exacerbated by World War II and persisted at least until the late 1950s.

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\(^2\) Quoted in ‘High Priest of the Twentieth Century’, *People*, 17 January 1951, p. 18.
From this perspective, Greig suggests that the economy, even the austerity of the modern home was to a large extent 'necessary', and is of historical interest as a point of intersection for a number of themes, ranging from the aspirations of a post-war generation of consumers for an efficient minimum of 'decent shelter' to the advice of 'experts' in serving those aspirations. My paper offers a complementary, or supplementary, discussion of that intersection between expertise and aspiration by asking the question: in what way did the terms in which the 'modern' was defined in domestic design comprehend and seek to address those aspirations of post-war consumerism? I agree with Greig's insistence on the 'relative autonomy' of the modern home 'from the structural dynamics of capitalist expansion'. But I want to draw attention to the subjective – or subjectivised – processes of adjustment to post-war modernity as they formed an integral part of much commentary on the ways in which people were to make their lives in the new spaces of the modern home. Where Greig emphasises its necessary form, I want to consider the ways in which architects, designers and interior decorators built a language around the home of often subtle differentiations of social and personal role which are too often taken for granted in celebrations of the 'modern'.

While this paper, as noted in the Preface, expands some suggestions made in a forthcoming book dealing with post-war social analysis in Australia, it is at best a provisional and schematic survey of the particular field of domestic architecture. It does not offer any survey of the extent to which the many words written about the 'modern home' in the post-war years translated into a built reality, either in direct application or through a slower, more selective permeation of styles and practices. Such a study would no doubt be interesting and wide-ranging, dealing not only with the physical objects of the post-war housing boom but also all the evocations and aspirations associated with that period as expressed in literature and the visual arts. But for the moment my concentration is on the words and the worlds which they built in themselves.

‘Twentieth-century space is asymmetrical, teasing, promising, endless’: so reflected Robin Boyd, Australia’s leading post-war architectural critic, in 1965, almost as a reprise to Seidler. This ‘teasing’ quality had never been more pronounced, Boyd continued, than at the ‘cross-roads’ of the 1950s. By then architects were, as he saw it, confirmed in the revolution-cum-orthodoxy of modernism, yet still faced a choice between the ‘sentimentality’ of organic function – the Frank Lloyd Wright inheritance – or the ‘artificiality’ of pure form, the gospel according to Mies van der Rohe.4 In 1952, however, Boyd had been more categorical. Then he depicted architecture ‘at an awful flat stage between eras’, enduring a functionalism that had either declined into ‘little bits of New Empiricist detail with rustic finishes’ to be defended through voguish references to ‘moral purpose’ and ‘human values’, or had been stereotyped into ‘the glass box’ as if that was all it could amount to. ‘Why did functionalism fail?’, Boyd asked: ‘I think it was too strong, too difficult, altogether too hard for the people who could have practised it’.5 In other comments throughout the 1950s, Boyd applied this criticism with particular force to the ‘aesthetic calamity’ of Australian domestic architecture, where ‘featurism’, as he termed it, had stolen the privileges of modernism – its links to prosperity, mass production, self-expression – and turned them into a travesty.6 While the severity of Boyd's comments and injunctions was distinctive, he was far from alone in the fifties in this sense of the troubled mission of modern architecture, its equivocal relation to post-war affluence, and the inability of its practitioners and its consumers to keep its integrity.

In this paper I am focusing on the interior design of the modern home not from the perspective of aesthetic evaluation, but in terms of the considerations that were brought to bear in determining how the ideal of the 1950s home was to relate to the personalities of its occupants. Much of the commentary that is discussed in this paper was in an intellectual rather than a popular mode and relates to ideals of the modern home that were often self-consciously elitist. Even so, in this very self-consciousness, in this invocation of its status as an alternative form, and in the inevitable

interdependence between the communicative (as opposed to the strictly functional) aspects of architecture and other social codes (of domesticity, privacy, gendered roles etc), the ideal modern home was very much a product if not a symptom of its time.\(^7\) If it was not, as Greig argues, an instrument of ideological manipulation, it was nevertheless an integral part of post-war cultural formation.

This home might have been depicted as a perfect capsule of confident modernity; but what of those within, who were to adapt to such ‘teasing...endless’ space? – those who were to be liberated in to the modern age at a time when, as Boyd saw it, they were also more than ever prey to the ‘restless confusion’ of ‘the sumptuous world of interior decorators’, for whom ‘space is splintered into...separate visual effects’.\(^8\) Caught at this intersection, questions of ‘taste’ and aesthetic purity registered many anxieties. Through these questions unprecedented claims were made upon the depths of individual subjectivity, constituting a domestic equivalent to that phenomenon Richard Sennett has observed in the public architecture – the ‘glass boxes’ and curtain walls – of the International School: the merging of 'the aesthetics of visibility and social isolation' as concepts of public accountability collapse into the regulated intimacy of the private domain.\(^9\) And no one was more scrutinised in this process than that consolidating figure of the 1950s, the ‘housewife’, the consumer and the home-maker, who stood at the centre of the open modern suburban house. As one hesitant critic of the doctrine of pure efficiency in kitchen design put it: ‘a cliff of clean white cleanliness, however shiny, is not permanently congenial when considered as part of a living room’.\(^10\)

Interior design is an intriguing theme to trace through the political culture of post-World War II Australia. Far from being a register of mere fashion, it identifies an overlapping of professional advice, prevailing taste, the evocation of private space and identity, and the ambit of personal

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\(^8\) Boyd, *The Puzzle*, pp. 82-3.


consumption, all at a time of significant social change. As a potential vocation, it secured a remarkable prominence in the reconstruction campaigns of the war, even in Army Education. There it was a part of programs to raise morale through the hope of a better post-war world and to return those in the services to a more affluent, industrially-transformed society which might not value older craft-based skills (with their links with class-based concepts of respectability) but demanded an 'integrity' of function in mass-produced items almost as a stimulus to the loyalty of citizenship. It also encompassed an increasing concern with psychological dimension of social and personal adjustment – that concern, for example, expressed by Tasman Lovell, Professor of Psychology at the University of Sydney in 1931, that 'neither private loyalties nor the public interest seem to be well served since we came to rely on the individual's own initiative and own independence'. And this post-war prominence of interior design continued in new courses in technical colleges and an increasing attention to issues of industrial design, an interest itself often built on wartime technological advance. More fundamentally, this attention to design can be seen to register the search for a new medium between a citizenry mobilised out of their customary social contexts on a massive scale and the perception that the political and economic stresses of the post-war world would make considerable demands on the more subjective bases of social allegiance.

A series of radio talks in 1941 on 'Design in Everyday Things' indicates something of this expanding field of reference. 'It is generally accepted', the introductory talk began,

that our environment, quite as much as our heredity, has a profound influence on our character...those who insist on surrounding themselves with beautiful, faithfully designed and built objects would naturally tend to seek and experience the joys and the dignity of a civilised and cultured life, resist humbug, expose trickery and hate all that is shoddy and second-rate, avoid regimentation, but develop a social sense.

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This careful disaggregation of personal attributes reveals much about its context, not least the shift from a quasi-eugenic concern with social type to an interest in individual personality. An Army Education pamphlet on interior decoration similarly advocated the combined goals of ‘peace, unity, variety and individuality’ for a society enduring the stresses of war, and likely to be increasingly subject to commercial advertising. The emerging social ethos, so the introduction to the ABC talks added, was one in which ‘we like to be different, but not too different.’ What was involved in these differentiations was not simply aesthetic standards, but the mediation of quite complex relations between personal adjustment and a changing world of consumption, ideological conflict and social regulation. As one manual observed in 1944 – a book which was parachuted to troops in Army Education parcels and even found its way to prisoners behind Japanese lines – ‘interior decoration is a civilised art with a primitive appeal; it strikes deep down to the fundamental instinct of home-making which is inherent in us all’. Yet in a world of rapid technological change, presenting greater opportunities for self-expression as well as for mere imitation, this was the first of many such manuals to insist that private instinct must become a subject of careful instruction.

It was not only the subject of this instruction who was being redefined around concepts of personality, for in this process the nature of the knowledge appropriate to dealing with these new issues of private adjustment was also redefined in ways that can be linked to the post-war rhetoric surrounding the modern home. In the late 1940s a new professionalism characterised architects and designers, deriving on the one hand from a renewed sense of the 'scientific' basis of their work and on the other from a perception that society was less and less amenable to the public management associated with inter-war 'experts' on matters of national development, for example, or social hygiene, and more attuned to the interventions of private professionals in – as Foucault termed it – 'the

everyday individuality of everyone.\textsuperscript{15} This professionalism might itself be seen as a product of the wartime mobilisation of expertise, leading into reconstructionist concepts of a 'new social order' seeking to recognise the claims of the individual within community, then coupled to the increasing politicisation surrounding 'planning'. So, for example, a 1944 report on 'post-war development' published by the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (RAIA) welcomed the marshalling of resources, technology and industry made possible by wartime intervention, even calling for the public control of all land, while also recommending that responsibility for initiatives in planning be vested 'in the smallest groups capable of such work' so as to preserve 'popular enthusiasm'.\textsuperscript{16} By 1950, an editorial in the RIIA's journal, Architecture, was characterised by a deeper caution:

To a professional eager for the development of artistic, literary and cultural appreciation in the community, the advances made in the post-war years towards a more general acceptance of the need for a more aesthetic approach to physical development in our cities, towns and countryside have been most heartening. But there are warning signs of the need for public guidance, lest this development become confused with any political philosophy. Political whirlwinds could leave planning in the air.\textsuperscript{17}

Behind this careful differentiation of 'public', 'professional', 'planning' and 'political', and this welcoming of the recognition of the 'aesthetic approach', was occurring a pronounced shift in the social alignment of architects and designers from the inter-war to the post-war years.

Just to indicate some of the features of this shift, it is useful to note that in the inter-war years modern design had been closely associated with concepts of cultural and national maturation and sociological change. In 1930 Ure Smith linked his journal, The Home, to an appreciation of a 'distinctly suitable architecture for our climate' among 'young married people with moderate means'.\textsuperscript{18} In 1935 Architecture linked 'rational

\textsuperscript{15} Quoted in Jan Goldstein, 'Foucault Among the Sociologists: the "disciplines" and the history of the professions', History and Theory, vol. 23, no. 1, 1984, p.174.
\textsuperscript{17} 'A National Rostrum', Architecture, vol. 38, no. 1, 1950, p. 39.
\textsuperscript{18} Sydney Ure Smith, 'The Story of The Home', The Home, March 1930, p.32.
design' to national characteristics, so there was 'Germany's scientific trend' or France's 'appreciation of beauty', as opposed to the 'jazzy effects' prevalent in Australia.\(^1\) That same year when *The Home* advised that 'a wealth of ornamentation is as out of place today in architecture as a vulgar display of personal jewellery', the allusion was not so much to the depths of personality adjustment which featured in the 1940s and fifties as to appropriate comportment in quite specific social contexts.\(^2\) The modernism of the 1930s, as Mary Eagle has observed, was acceptable as high fashion within the largely feminised domain of the decorative arts yet suspected of being un-Australian, even 'barbaric' in the 'higher' arts such as painting – a segregation which itself underlines the extent to which modernism then carried strong class associations which were to be kept in careful balance with a sense of inculcating an Australian national type. Inter-war domesticity – particularly for the working class – might have been 'disenchanted' by the intrusive experts in hygiene and efficiency studied by Kereen Reiger, but a suburban middle class was at least able to claim for its own the aesthetics of 'scientific beauty' as exemplified, say, in the prints and paintings of Margaret Preston. And this privilege might even be extended to the philanthropy of experts advancing the common good. W.R. Laurie, a regular contributor to the *Architecture*, might have complained in the early 1950s of the prevailing limitations on professionalism which reduced architects to an 'intellectual proletariat', but in 1935 he wrote of the need to alter the self-perception among his colleagues from being 'a collection of individual agents...to become the corporate section of the community engaged in housing the community'. In the preceding issue in 1935 the RAIA president, A.W. Anderson, noted with some pride that, amid a new commitment to slum clearance and town planning, 'in no other profession or business has State Socialism gone as far as in Architecture'.\(^2\)

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Post-war professionalism, however, effectively replaced class and fashion with the necessity of maintaining aesthetic integrity in the mass market. It contributed to the transformation of a social analysis centring on a generic national type into one concerned with a carefully balanced way of life. In this process, it reoriented public reformism towards the making of private yet still accountable worlds. Precisely because it took much of its justification from a chronic housing shortage, the rhetoric of post-war modernism in housing lost those older class overtones in this new language of professionalism. An Australian Society of Designers for Industry was established in 1947, for example; in 1949 Ure Smith launched *Art and Design* to 'stimulate a demand for better design in everyday life'. For their part, architects were still encouraged towards social duty, but even in this a new emphasis on professionalism moderated claims to a corporate spirit. Recasting the teaching of architecture at the University of Melbourne to incorporate a more extensive professional knowledge of materials, techniques and the building industry, Brian Lewis, the Professor of Architecture, argued in 1947 that the design of a private house might be the 'most unremunerative' work an architect could undertake yet that the complexities and the responsibilities of work at that scale were central to their training. By 1950, however, the tensions between social role and professional practice emerged very clearly in a debate in *Architecture* over 'public architecture'. To one participant, the concept recognised the expanding role for architects in more coordinated societies, a transition itself stemming from 'the change in social structure resulting from the war, with the development of a new attitude to social service'. The reply was uncompromising: the 'years of war served only to accentuate the nationalisation of architects'. Further, 'architecture should be regarded as a service available at a price commensurate with its importance and cost of production to such discerning private individuals, communities and governments as will appreciate and demand its rightful employment'.

The political polarity here is obvious, and expressed common sentiments of the time – to the extent of being easily parodied in student reviews:

"A Cliff of White Cleanliness":

Are you, too, professional? Nice, isn't it? Upper section of the nation leading the man-in-the-street to homes in the best of taste. Splendid feeling. Gives one a point of view. Mind you, private practice isn't at all what it used to be, hardly worth the candle really. Nothing much you can do with the public – no background to them if you know what I mean...25

Once more, it is clear that considerations other than design alone were involved in such exchanges. What informed this realignment can be read as a more elusive but perhaps more significant debate over the subjective bases of post-war citizenship as the 'professional', with whatever frustrations, seeks through 'private practice' to transform 'the public'. While Boyd denounced 'vague humanism' (in contrast to his own conviction that 'science can eventually answer all our problems'26), the austerity of post-war domestic architecture was often debated around the need for some such quality to mediate the stark contrast between the public and the private, not simply as political spheres but as spaces of personal adjustment. Architects writing for the RAIA journal anxiously called for 'some form of moral regeneration' and a rejection of 'sham and falsehood' in design.27 They welcomed the expanded sphere of practice that modernism had presented them, but cautioned of the need to restore a degree of artistic 'intuition' in addressing 'man's psychological reactions to forms, colours and textures'.28 They questioned whether 'physical planning may be and is employed as a mask and a screen for unpopular things in political and economic planning'.29 They aspired to Walter Gropius' conviction, reiterated during his tour of Australia in 1954, that:

Today, after a long period of l'art pour l'art – so utterly unrelated to the collective life of man – a new language of vision is slowly replacing individualistic terms like "taste" and "feeling" with terms like "objective validity". Based on biological facts

26 Boyd, 'A Three Sided Debate', p. 15.
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- both physical and psychological ... it seeks to represent the apersonal cumulative experience of successive generations.30

In all of these ways, architects in the early 1950s make a revealing case study of the political reorientations of the period, for while they might have been seeking to express an 'apersonal' 'collective life', they also feared that the further entrenchment of government regulation would render them, more than any other profession, dependent upon the state – and, after all, 'the socialisation of architecture is a contradiction in terms, equivalent to the binding of freemen.'31 Holding the line of professionalism, Brian Lewis insisted in 1952 that 'in the progress of house design there is an international exchange of ideas', adding that 'the truly modern homes of any age corresponded directly to their contemporary way of life rather than to fashion'.32 Yet, reflecting all these preoccupations and anxieties, the modern home of the 1950s was to be far from a pure, scientific emblem of its time.

As Greig has already suggested, Robin Boyd is rightly esteemed as an incisive critic of the conformity and superficiality of post-war suburbia, yet he is perhaps also part of the problem of an intellectual critique of the course of post-war development which lacked a systematic engagement with its practical realities. Certainly, Boyd's uncompromising functionalism often rendered as pathological the more subjective components of the private embrace of the opportunities of the modern age: the lack of 'adjustment' among Australians to their natural environment; their enduring fetish for 'the artist' over 'the ethics of design for ... total simplicity'.33 In 1943, then Sergeant Boyd outlined his enduring concerns in the journal of the Army Education Service. He encouraged servicemen to aspire to 'simple, direct, livable housing', which would provide 'greater freedom' because uncluttered by trimmings: a neutral environment in which a balance between utility and personal 'idiosyncrasy' might be observed – for individual taste, paradoxically, could easily slide into the merely popular, overwhelming houses designed to give that same

32 Lewis, 'Old Style Homes Do Not Provide the Answer', Age, 16 February 1952.
individual ‘freedom’. In 1950, with such a ‘House of Tomorrow’ on exhibition in Melbourne, Boyd regretted that hopes that the model might be assessed ‘objectively’ were dashed in surveys that revealed ‘everyone...looked at it subjectively’. In 1951 he was disillusioned that tenants decorated with ‘free shaped peach mirrors and suchlike’ the new apartments designed by his future partner, Frederick Romberg. By 1952, proclaiming that, architecturally, ‘Australia is the small house’, Boyd lamented a suburbia which had declined into ‘unco-operative individualism’, and in which, for example, the concept of a ‘master bedroom’ had triumphed over ‘informality’ and the ‘amalgamation of space into larger areas’ of modern family living.

In all of this commentary, Boyd sought to reconcile a philosophy of design that promised liberation with the resistance to innovation of ‘the chicken of human character and the egg of habit’. In practical terms, he was one of the initiators of the Age Small Homes Service, which operated in conjunction with the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects from the late 1940s, and offered advice and plans to those hoping to build efficient and economical homes amid the prevailing shortages, always advocating a modernism framed around ‘new construction, new space patterns, positive, yet unaggressive, forms’. For it was not ‘beauty’ that was ‘our real need’, Boyd was insisting by 1957, ‘but dignity’ – an intriguing emphasis on a more normative public presentation of self rather than expressive private taste. In 1958 he wondered how it was that ‘a funny man like Barry Humphries has only to say "blue wrought iron" in his intense way and his audience nearly dies laughing' yet 'on returning home, they would be frightened of their front porch without the fancy bits'. Was it simply the fact that Australians had more opportunities, culturally, economically and politically, to express themselves in private which accounted for the difference between their featurism and a Scandinavian sense of the 'total environment'. Or might it have had something to do with the ways in which

38 'Gropius in Melbourne', Age, 3 May 1954
Boyd himself constructed the categories of public and private, and derided as featurism what might have been better understood as attempts to make new suburban housing correspond to experiences and personas of those who were not so comfortable with his triumphant ‘science’.

Others found more ready solutions not in pursuing an integration of the ‘ordinary functions’ of life, but in affirming that elusive private subjectivity. In place of, or in answer to, Boyd’s relentless search for an ‘anonymous’ public dignity, this commentary affirmed a new personality of private citizenship which was very much a part of the political culture of the 1950s. At a 1952 exhibition of ‘Homes for the Future’, organised by the Sydney division of the RAIA, it was observed that architects must become primarily concerned with ‘the question of domestic work, now that most housewives cannot get help in the house’. It was added that walls should be left bare, recognising that ‘many housewives are interested in interior decoration’ and should give their own personal stamp to the domestic environment. So somewhere between Boyd’s developing attack on featurism – ‘cream plaster walls, multi-coloured floral carpets, genoa velvet lounge suites and walnut veneer cocktail cabinets supported on bent chromium pipes’ – and the bare walls awaiting the imprint of personality, somewhere in the ‘teasing’ space of the modern home, stands the figure of the housewife: ‘gracious mistress, but housemaid, too’ as Home Beautiful described her. What was she to do?

There were plenty of experts, as Greig has already demonstrated, prepared to offer advice, to encourage the kind of introspective scrutiny (‘Have you ever seriously asked yourself if you are conservative?’) that was so much a part of the rhetoric of modern design at that time. The key terms the housewife was to observe were unity, informality, light, integrity; the anathema were gimmicks, ornamentation, inefficiency. Again, what is

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striking about these terms is that although they purported to recognise the unprecedented and liberating penetration of modernity – of materials, opportunities and expectations – into the private sphere, the ethic of 'transparency' gave them an equally unprecedented public accountability. No longer mediated through the inter- and intra-class concepts of 'respectability' and 'character' (which at least allowed for some privacy behind the facade and the front room), the architecture of the modern home opened all spaces, most especially those of domesticity, to scrutiny in terms of personality. More than just a sales pitch, these discriminations were prominently advocated in the new intellectual journalism of the later 1950s, such as Quadrant, for example, with its early interest in issues of design. In Quadrant, also, the search was for a more 'anonymous' aesthetics for 'the ordinary man'; an aesthetics which offered to manoeuvre an awkward path through rescuing 'personal choice' from ornamentation while at the same time arguing that 'the ordinary life of the ordinary man is still horribly overshadowed by bad design, putting about him such a cloak of repressive monotone that he is not even aware of it'.

Other articles in Quadrant called for the return of 'good manners' in architecture, or for the discovery of 'a new urban humanism...based on spiritual principles, served rather than dominated by technology and commerce'. It was almost as if, having extracted the 'ordinary man' from the complexities of social change for the sake of the pure moment of modernity, it was now possible to define social roles in terms of abstract imperatives rather than messy historical contingencies.

At a much less intellectualised level, the aesthetics of anonymity received particularly graphic application in a 1960 feature in Home Beautiful, advising the owners of older houses how to eradicate the 'styles' of yesterday for the sake of contemporary utility (Figure 1). From one perspective, it is the concerted destruction of historical and architectural...
After the bursting of the land boom of the 1890s, Australian house fashion swung round to Queen Anne. This example has almost, but not quite, all the gimmicks of its period. There is the turret-like spire, broken roof, ridge ornaments, ornate chimney, arches and wood in-fill, false half timbering, weatherboards cut to imitate shingles, and colored leadlight windows. Missing are the terracotta gargoyles.

With a dominating feature such as the turret, which is so much out of harmony with modern architectural ideals, very little can be done aesthetically without removing the feature altogether, as has been done here.

The sun-room extension to the room on the right hand side might have been given a gable roof, but it is not always possible to match the color of the old tiles, and those which were retrieved from the removal of the spire-like roof feature were used to patch up the existing roof. Therefore, the new portion has been given a flat roof.

The removal of the arches has given a broader and less closed-in effect to the right hand part of the house.

Source: *Home Beautiful*, 1960, vol 39, no 10
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integrity that must strike us now; from another, it is the campaign to eradicate the signifiers of status and respectability and any attachment to the past for the sake of the neutral and 'objective' effects of 'rhythm' and 'breadth'.

It is not easy to determine, either with *House and Garden* or *Home Beautiful*, exactly who was addressed by such commentary, or to what extent they were offered feasible projects or merely alluring ideals: the reader was not consistently or explicitly gendered as either male or female, and while the implication was always that the images were of family or at least marital homes, the signs of active parenting (perhaps not surprisingly) were rarely featured in image or text. When children's bed- or play-rooms were featured, there was always some concession to the decoration that seemed appropriate to childhood. We might note in passing, however, that a survey of British and Australian women's magazines in 1950 revealed that while 'the British housewife can defeat her Australian cousin in every section' of hand crafts (perhaps reflecting 'the age-long tradition of peasant crafts'), the reverse was true in relation to 'house planning and gardening'.

These spheres, 'not touched on in British papers', constituted a strong sphere of interest and aspiration if not responsibility for Australian women, with their presumed affluence, their greater access to mass produced goods, their separation from the past and orientation to the future.47 For all this, however, there was no doubt that the figure of the housewife stood at the centre of the house and was particularly associated with the consolidation of the modern Australian home.

Clement Macintyre has emphasised the extent to which the new 'flexibility' of domestic design in the 1940s and 1950s served to advance 'the needs and demands of the baby-boom generation', but it is important to note also the ways in which the new spaces of the home did not simply 'reflect' but also contained and defined those 'new family patterns'.48 For the openness and utility of the modern home were the corollary of the changing social and psychological function of the family unit which, as one commentator on the techniques of emerging Marriage Guidance Counselling movement noted,


had become a specialised social agency, mainly concerned with the
regularisation of sexual relations and the basic socialisation of children’ in
the absence of any more extensive connections with concepts of community.
Not only did the housewife provide a focus for the family but she also
provided the domestic context for the concept of the ‘companionate
marriage’ as it, too, was enshrined in the new manuals on personal
relationships as a way of regularising the sexual and subjective needs and
the vital place of sexual pleasure in the lives of husband and wife. Here,
too, issues of personality were central: the family from a psychological
point of view, like the home from an architectural point of view, was to
‘organise all an individual’s separate parts into one’. 49 And the modern
home even enabled new formulations of maternal citizenship. ‘The present­
day housewife’, as envisaged by Seidler, ‘does not want to be shut away
from her family while preparing, or simply unfreezing, meals. She wants
to be able to partake in conversation with her family and guests, and, above
all she demands an efficient and pleasing work centre’. And so the domestic
architecture of ‘an egalitarian welfare state society’ should leave women,
Seidler added, ‘more time for looking after children, for community
activities and hobbies’. 50

As Lesley Johnson has argued, the language of ‘the modern’ – of the
rational, the expansive and the dynamic – was unstable in its application to
women. 51 Richard Sennett makes a similar point in relation to the concepts
of the public and private, which, carrying their distinct moral overtones,
are historically much less easily spanned by women than men. 52 Yet – as
two cartoons by George Molnar in 1959 neatly suggest (Figure 2) – the
transparency of the modern home was crucially mediated by women, and
by feminised preoccupations with social standing, refined further and
further away from the (masculine) world of occupation and closer to the
(feminine) search for personality. Seidler’s rather technocratic recognition

49 Harold Fallding, ‘Inside the Australian Family’ in A.P. Elkin (ed.), Marriage and the
50 Quoted by Neil Clerehan, rev. Seidler, Houses, Interiors, Projects, Age, 5 February
1955, p.12; also ‘Notes on Architecture’ in Harry Seidler: 1955-63, Sydney, 1963,
p. 10.
51 Lesley Johnson, The modern girl: girlhood and growing up, Buckingham, 1993,
esp. ch. 2.
52 Sennett, esp. p. 23.
Figure 2: Two cartoons from George Molnar's 'Insubstantial Pageant' series, published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1959. (Reproduced with permission of the artist)

"Darling, if you want to look at the view you must go inside. What do you think we got the glass wall for?"

"No, darling. Only common people eat in the kitchen. People like us cook in the dining-room."
of the duties of motherhood might acknowledge the housewife as a many-dimensional personality to a greater extent than was conceded by the image of the manager of inter-war domestic hygiene, but this did not necessarily alter the underlying expectations. As the modern kitchen – that ‘cliff of white cleanliness’ – assumed the status of a kind of universal form in the 1950s through myriad colour features and articles, it also came to provide a ready point of differentiation, not simply of gender roles but also of personality types. There at least modernism began to concede the necessity of sentiment, but only after it had cleared the ground: 'Perhaps as the mothers of a world striken with atomic unease', it was allowed in Home Beautiful feature in 1955, 'they are subconsciously revolting against science itself'. And, after all, 'you can always tell the personality of the family by their kitchen'. There was, for example, 'the woman who regards herself as a slave to household chores – particularly the working wife'; or there were – note the language – 'other Australian wives – artists in cooking' who 'enjoy an appreciative audience while they are exhibiting their mastery of the greatest of domestic arts...They like people around them to talk to while at work, especially if those people are their family'.53 To this paean, one correspondent responded that while people in her kitchen gave her 'nerves', 'a husband must never feel “shut out” of the kitchen. Otherwise he may seek the solace of the hotel bar. And growing children may find solace in some homely women’s kitchen'.54

Such sentiments of that time are familiar to us. In noticing them again my suggestion is that we need to recognise that the ideal of the modern home did not so much liberate new social roles as render them accountable to new forms of scrutiny. If the political culture of the 1950s seems to celebrate ‘the private’ (private enterprise; the private home to which mobilised women were returned after the war; the subsidised private choice of social policy; private conscience against public direction), this commentary on domestic design and interior decoration might indicate, as a crucial supplementary point, that the private of the 1950s became more than ever ‘transparent’ to public regulation – however subtle the new agencies of such regulation might have been. And if we see a process of ‘informalisation’ in post-war culture – in manners, in patterns of address, in the arrangement of

personal spaces, all moderating older concepts of class hierarchy and social role – we need also to recognise a countervailing process with its own attendant anxieties: a kind of formalising of the self with reference to the public gaze.\textsuperscript{55}

This formality can be seen to have been particularly demanding for women. The private might once have been constituted the essential sphere for women, being posited in the liberal tradition as the realm of necessity, futility and shame, as opposed to the public of freedom, permanence and honour.\textsuperscript{56} Yet given the mobilisation of wartime, the increasing ‘sexualisation’ of women during that period,\textsuperscript{57} the social empowerment of post-war affluence, the threat of excessive consumption, it might be argued that the political culture of the 1950s did not trust ‘the private’ and the place of women within it. There is a remarkable congruence between the more traditional terms in which the private was defined as the ‘natural’ and ‘moral’ sphere of women and the careful differentiations of personality and taste as they figured in the post-war ornament-versus-unity debate. As society slowly negotiated the shortages and disruptions of war, \textit{Home Beautiful} often carried articles on designs and decoration of bachelor flats, for the ‘masculine’ as a style that easily spanned the modern public and private. It was very different for women: a 1955 article offered very careful advice to the ‘woman who lives alone’ – she ‘must be very careful about her diet and appearance...when there is no other person to criticise’. To cope, ‘flowers on the table, or arranged in the room, are a real tonic for a woman. A neglected home will be reflected in a woman’s personality...Wear well-fitting shoes, spotlessly clean accessories, and your whole attitude to life will be the best you can achieve.’\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{55} For an account of such a reciprocal process, see Cas Wouters, ‘Informalisation and the civilising process’ in Peter Gleichman, Johan Goudsblom and Hermann Korte (eds.), \textit{Human Figurations: Essays for Norbert Elias}, Amsterdam, 1977, pp.437-453.


\textsuperscript{57} See Marilyn Lake, ‘Female Desires; the meaning of World War Two’, Australian Historical Studies, vol.24, no.95, 1990.

\textsuperscript{58} ‘It’s so easy to “back-slide” when you live alone’, \textit{Australian Home Beautiful}, vol.34, no.6, p.87.
By the end of the 1950s many of the anxieties I have touched on here seem to have been dispersing, or at least the issues of transition they registered acquired a more stable formality in the mediation of public and private by an increasing sense of 'life-style' consumption. The professionalism of architecture, too, became more secure, a process which can be traced through, for example, the small journal, *Cross-Section*, launched in 1952 from the University of Melbourne and styled as 'a private communication to architects and master builders'. Offering a wide-ranging survey of new building, with a particular attention to innovative use of techniques and materials, *Cross-Section* was from the start restless with the pre-occupation with private housing and the 'directions post-war urge to be "modern"'. By 1955 – in a special issue published in three languages – it was welcoming the arrival of 'a more genuine desire to build simply and well', especially as it was associated with an increasing shift in emphasis from suburban homes to public buildings, 'hospitals, schools and factories', offices and flats. Its terms of evaluation were revealing: at their best, buildings were 'taut', 'neat', 'controlled'; at worst, they were 'confused' or 'staggeringly inept', featuring 'crazy paving suitable for dogs, small-children or hobgoblins' or showing the disturbing signs of a designer who 'really let his hair down'.  

Still, as early as 1956 a visiting British Professor of Design advised his Sydney audience that 'designer eclectic' was replacing 'pre-war functional': 'Pattern', he stated, 'is back...Pattern on anything, may be new, old, huge, tiny, narrative, abstract as long as each is good of its kind: "suitability" has gone'. In response, designers and architects became even more confident within their professionalism. Their role, searching for 'a new language of ornament', could be framed around the perception that 'people as a whole are really quite inarticulate. They buy what they see, not necessarily because they like it, but because that is what is offering'. As Greig also observes of *House and Garden*, advertisements in *Home Beautiful* started to

59 These comments are based on a survey of *Cross-Section* for the 1950s, but see especially no.27, January 1955. Again, my thanks to Graeme Holland for directing me to this journal.

60 James de Holden Stone, 'As I was Saying ...', *Architecture in Australia*, vol 45, no.1, 1956, p.32.

'A Cliff of White Cleanliness':

offer 'gracious living' rather than 'modern style', and, revealingly, an article in 1960 on 'The Colonial Flavour' traced the swelling demand for furniture which 'embodies...the rugged warmth and stern necessity...of the early American settlers' to 'the introduction of T.V. [and of Westerns] to Australia'. Featurism may have been rampant, but it was now more a matter for wry comment than moral alarm as a consumerist society settled into its own hierarchies. Writing in Architecture in 1957, Milo Dunphy complained that few architects, except for English professors and Seidler's high-density 'zealots', gave any thought to the environmental context of their work, and he recounted an overheard conversation in which one architect observed to another that 'since we put up our fees on houses to 12% we've never had to do another...Laughter'. Even in the regular columns of the Age Small Homes Service by then there was a tension between condemning a tendency to mere 'style' in Australian housing, which overlooked the contemporary social roles housing should express and advance (such as 'the strange case of the forgotten housewife'), and a resistance to plans for urban consolidation which would disrupt the pattern which has 'unwittingly enabled a goodly proportion of our nine million people to maintain independence and individuality'. By 1961 a survey of 'Best Australian Homes' observed that not only had the 'new bareness...been smugly adapted' to 'ease of maintenance', but 'the structure replaces the suite as the family status symbol'.

So that display of possessions which had once defined social standing had been replaced by the modern functional home, ostensibly classless, defined by the disciplined personality of the 'home maker', available to only a few in its pure form but perhaps pervasive in its influence on the aspirations of the many. No conspiracy was involved in this transformation, but rather a complex series of interactions between the 'teasing' and 'transparent' spaces of the modern home and its surrounding society. No doubt, as Greig indicates, many other factors were involved in this transformation which have been left out of the rather tenuous synthesis offered in this survey. Yet

one argument, shared between this and Greig's paper, is clear: there is a need to allow our interpretations of the 1950s more complexity than usually accompanies the convenient themes of political polarisation on the one hand and nostalgia on the other.
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