

## 4. Form Follows Formula: Grounds, Boyd and the Philip House



**Figure 4.1 Philip House, view from north-east**

Photograph: Ben Wrigley, 2011

John Philip was brought to Canberra as part of Frankel's ambitious postwar recruitment program, and was appointed head of a new agricultural physics group at the CSIRO. Regarded as Australia's leading environmental physicist, he was elected a Fellow of the Australian Academy of Science in 1967. His wife, Frances ('Fay'), was an accomplished artist who was related to the Boyds via the Mills and à Becketts, and had attended the Murrumbidgee State School in Victoria with Mary and Arthur Boyd. Many of Frances's portraits of Australia's leading scientists and academics—including Sir Mark Oliphant, Doug Waterhouse, John Jaeger, William Rogers, Patrick Moran and Manning Clark—are held in the collections of the Australian Academy of Science and The Australian National University.

The Philip House, at 42 Vasey Crescent, Campbell, is one of three adjacent houses by Grounds, Romberg and Boyd that are known collectively as the Vasey Crescent Group. The other two houses in the group are the Blakers House and the Griffing House. Grounds and Boyd were both involved with these houses. All three were designed by Grounds, who arranged initial briefings, recorded

the clients' requirements and prepared sketches from late 1959 through to early 1960. Boyd met with the clients in January 1960, and took control of the houses from May of that year as Grounds prepared for a three-month overseas trip.<sup>1</sup>

The Philip House is important for two reasons. The first is because of its status as part of a group. This signals a shift away from a focus on the house as a singular, artistic statement—an edifice that is complete in its own right. The Philip House, as one member of a group of three adjacent houses, provides an opportunity to discuss a more collaborative approach to residential design. The second reason for studying the Philip House is to examine the extraordinary contribution made by John Philip. It could be argued that his involvement in the design process, and his impact upon the built form, was equal to that of Grounds or of Boyd. But unlike his capital-city predecessors in architectural patronage—Fenner and Zwar—Philip was not primarily motivated by the visual iconography of modern architecture or design. What drove him instead was a relentless pursuit of the optimum way in which the house, as a habitable structure, could address function and human comfort.

## A Collaborative Ethos

It was through a series of fortuitous events that the Vasey Crescent Group came to be planned as a coordinated series of houses by one architectural firm. On 21 July 1959, the three blocks were sold by the Department of the Interior at public auction in Albert Hall. The bidding for Block 9 (number 42) proceeded for some time before Philip raised his hand, doubled the previous bid, and purchased the lease for £1010. Number 44 was purchased by Bruce Griffing—a quantitative inheritance geneticist who also worked under Frankel—and his wife, Penny. Gordon Blakers, a senior public servant, and his wife, Catherine, bought number 46. The day after the auction, *The Canberra Times* reported on the front page that 'some of the highest premiums ever offered for residential leases in Canberra were paid in keen bidding', and that 'Mr. J. R. Philip of Lyneham' had paid the highest premium for his site.

The views to be obtained from the elevated location were part of the attraction of Campbell. Philip explained to *The Canberra Times* that he and Frances were 'pleased with the view from the land and they might even see the Lakes in

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1 Grounds' departure, and Boyd's subsequent involvement from the early documentation phase through to completion, resulted in Graeme Gunn—who prepared drawings for the Philip and Griffing houses during July and August 1960 under Boyd's direction—having no recollection that Grounds had ever been involved. In addition to Gunn, other architects and draftsmen who worked on the Philip House included James McCormick, Pat Moroney and H. R. Stafford. Conrad Hamann, *Modern Architecture in Melbourne: The Architecture of Grounds, Romberg and Boyd, 1927–1971* (PhD dissertation, Visual Arts Department, Monash University, 1978), 186, footnote.

the future, “if we crane our necks”.<sup>2</sup> Although Philip and Griffing knew each other through work, they had not arranged to attend the auction together. Nor had they agreed to buy adjacent sites. Neither of them knew the Blakers. The first time the three owners met was when they went to inspect their sites, where they discussed general ideas for their houses.<sup>3</sup> Over the ensuing months all three Vasey Crescent owners independently approached Grounds to design their house: the Blakers shortly after the auction, the Griffings in August 1959, and the Philips in December.<sup>4</sup>

It was largely due to Frances that the Philips commissioned Grounds. With her father and brother both architects, hiring an architect seemed the normal thing to do. Having seen a house in Melbourne that attracted her attention, Frances knocked on the door to inquire if Grounds had designed it. Receiving confirmation that he had, Frances and John contacted the architect and visited his office—a converted terrace at 340 Albert Street, East Melbourne. There they were greeted by Grounds, who descended the stairs with open arms and announced—with ‘great pomp and ceremony and drama’—“ah, The Philips! Do come in. So you want me to do your house!”<sup>5</sup>

While it was a genuine coincidence that led to all three clients choosing Grounds, it was not altogether surprising given the influence of his Australian Academy of Science building. The critical acclaim the academy received greatly enhanced the reputation of Grounds, Romberg and Boyd in both Melbourne and Canberra contexts: the Griffings, for instance, considered them to be ‘the leading architectural firm in Australia’ at the time.<sup>6</sup> The academy building also played another role, becoming a regular location for Grounds and Boyd to meet their scientist clients when visiting the capital city.

Although the idea of coordinating a unified approach to the three houses appears to have originated with Grounds, it was an opportunity that all clients welcomed. Philip was aware of the significance of the venture. In 1960 he wrote to the Department of the Interior stating that ‘the prospect of three adjacent private houses designed by, and built under the supervision of, Roy Grounds is surely a chapter in domestic architecture unique not only to Canberra, but, indeed, to Australia as a whole’. He was also cognisant of the challenge that lay

2 *The Canberra Times* (22 July 1959): 1. At that time Lake Burley Griffin did not exist. Some details of the auction were obtained from Candida Griffiths, Interview by the author, 27 June 2008.

3 Eric Wilson, ‘Good-Mannered Houses’, *Australian Home Beautiful* (December 1963): 5.

4 Hamann, *Modern Architecture in Melbourne: The Architecture of Grounds, Romberg and Boyd, 1927–1971*, 186, footnote.

5 Candida Griffiths, Interview by the author, 27 June 2008. Details of the meeting with Grounds were compiled from information from this interview and from Geoffrey Serle, *Robin Boyd: A Life* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1995), 192.

6 ‘Griffing House, 44 Vasey Crescent, Campbell, Canberra’, Papers of John Philip (Manuscript), National Library of Australia, MS 9801, Box 1 (author not noted, but most likely Bruce or Penny Griffing).

before them: 'the need for the three adjoining houses to be planned, to some extent, in concert...has demanded the resolution of the conflicting requirements of three separate families.'<sup>7</sup>

While the Vasey Crescent clients were from professional backgrounds—scientists, a senior public servant and an artist—they shared a common concern for budget. Other traits were a disdain for the average postwar house—the Philips, in particular, were 'fairly scathing about the typical suburban box'<sup>8</sup>—a preference for modern architecture and design, an interest in gardening, and a strong commitment to environmental concerns, including passive solar design. In this way, the Vasey Crescent clients shared many attributes with those who commissioned postwar modern houses in North America, such as the Case Study House clients.<sup>9</sup>

An opportunity to design three adjacent houses for well-informed clients who were sympathetic to the tenets of modernism was rare in architectural practice. It was an opportunity that Grounds was equal to. Informed by his experience on previous houses, he began by establishing a 'kit of parts' to work with. This allowed him the freedom to express the individual requirements of each house, yet retain an overall consistency of architectural language. The most fundamental element of the kit was a simple rectangular prism constructed of unpainted concrete block-work, and protected by a low-pitched, metal deck roof with deep eaves overhangs. This appears to be an element that Grounds arrived at early on: an undated 'thumbnail' sketch alongside notes from his first meeting with the Philips indicated such a form. Added to the basic kit were vertical, black-painted timber posts to support cantilevered floors and roofs, timber planked eaves soffits, and large, timber-framed windows. In formal architectural terms, the compatibility and ultimate success of the group were due to Grounds' skill and dexterity in manipulating this limited range of components.

Grounds proceeded to arrange these elements on the three sites in various permutations. Conrad Hamann explained how the three houses were 'conceived as elementary groups of two rectangles. In the Blakers' house, the rectangles were juxtaposed. In the Griffing house, they were placed one in front of the other;

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7 John Philip to J. N. Rogers, Assistant Secretary (Lands), Lands and Survey Branch, Department of the Interior, Canberra, ACT, 9 April 1960, 'Philip House Canberra', Grounds, Romberg and Boyd Records 1927–1979, Manuscript Collection, State Library of Victoria, MS 13363, Box 61/1(b).

8 Candida Griffiths, Interview by the author, 27 June 2008.

9 Kevin Starr described these clients as 'progressive professionals who preferred modern architecture and the ideas and life style it embodied to that associated with the standard, traditionally-styled, suburban tract homes that proliferated in the postwar period...intellectual and sophisticated in taste if not in income'. Kevin Starr, 'The Case Study House Program and the Impending Future, Some Regional Considerations', in Esther McCoy, *'Arts & Architecture Case Study Houses', Blueprints for Modern Living: History and Legacy of the Case Study Houses* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), 163.

in the Phillip house they were stacked on top of each other'.<sup>10</sup> The end result was that each house was able to respond to the individual owners' requirements in terms of internal accommodation and facilities, resulting in varying internal room dimensions, plan types and overall form, while the whole group resembled a coherent architectural composition. Grounds considered the houses as a group from very early on: at the same time that he was holding preliminary discussions with the Philips about their house, all three clients were presented with a composite sketch layout that showed the footprints of the houses.

The means by which Grounds achieved a coordinated group were twofold: first, by creating a seamless visual flow across the site, and second, by maintaining and optimising views from each house. The house sites were located on a spur running in an east–west direction from nearby Russell Hill, which ended in a steep fall on the western boundary of the Philips' site. The Blakers' site was on the highest point of the spur, the Griffings' in the middle, and the Philips' at the lowest point. In the other direction, all sites sloped down from Canberra Nature Park at the rear towards Vasey Crescent. To achieve the optimum siting for the houses, Grounds radically departed from the normal practice of setting houses 7.6 m back from the street line. Instead, by setting each house progressively further back from its immediate neighbour, he allowed all three houses to follow the same hillside contour. In this way the Blakers House was located in the centre of its site, the Griffing House behind the centre line, and the Philip House right to the rear of its site. As the Blakers and Griffing houses were essentially 'L'-shaped, the resultant composite site plan appeared as a continuous line of building, stepping back up the hill, broken only by the two intermediate boundary lines.<sup>11</sup>

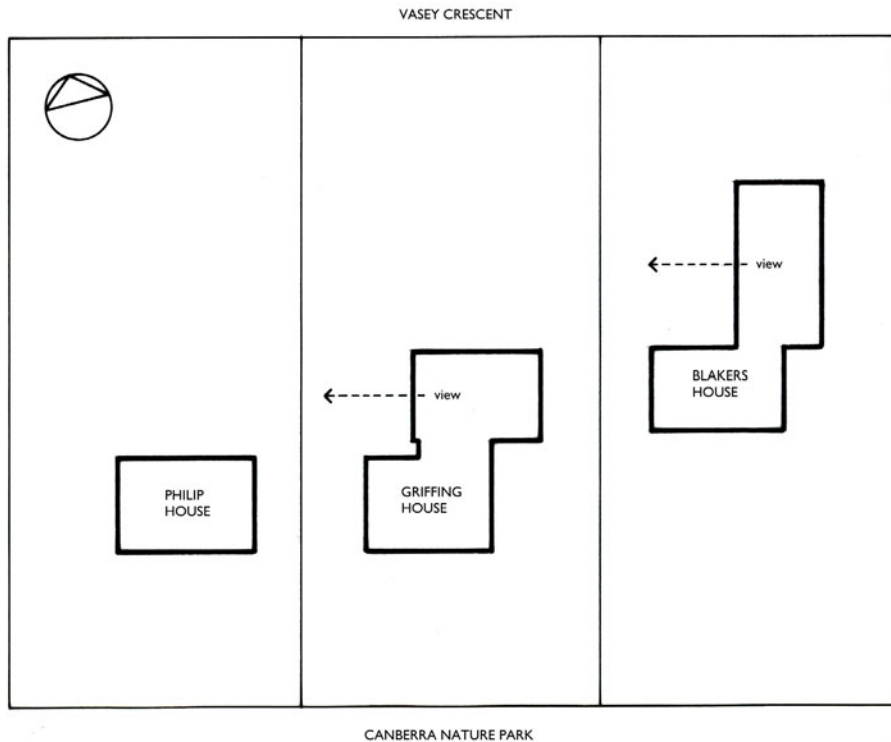
By stepping the houses in this way, Grounds achieved three objectives. The first was that all ground floors were virtually on the same level, which created visual continuity. And although the Philip House—at two storeys, with a basement partly below ground level—was the tallest structure, because it was the most recessive of the three, it did not dominate its neighbours. The third result of the stepping configuration was that views from each house were preserved and enhanced. All three enjoyed potential uninterrupted views towards Mount Ainslie to the north, and towards the city centre and proposed lake to the west. Again, had either the Philip House or the Griffing House been set at the standard 7.6 m from the street boundary, the scheme would not have worked, as western views from the other houses would have been obscured. The clients appreciated the placing of the houses on the sites in such a sympathetic manner. Catherine Blakers wrote to Grounds stating that 'we very much like the sketch plans and

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10 Hamann, *Modern Architecture in Melbourne: The Architecture of Grounds, Romberg and Boyd, 1927–1971*, 239.

11 Eric Wilson described the design in 'Good-Mannered Houses', 5–7.

the placing of the three houses on the block', while the Griffings appreciated 'the pattern made by the three houses and are pleased that each family has a view from its living area'.<sup>12</sup>



**Figure 4.2 Vasey Crescent Group, site plan**

Image: redrawn by the author from Grounds, Romberg and Boyd. Courtesy of Victoria Grounds and the Robin Boyd Foundation

But Grounds' carefully resolved site planning would have been negated had traditional, individual garden plans been implemented by the Vasey Crescent owners. With front fences banned by the Department of the Interior, the common solution was for individual owners to plant hedges or thick foliage along the front boundaries of their properties. The Philips, Griffings and Blakers realised from early on that this would not be an appropriate solution, and decided to coordinate an integrated landscape plan. Frances had long held a keen interest in

12 Catherine Blakers to Grounds, 2 December 1959, 'Blakers House Canberra, Correspondence', Grounds, Romberg and Boyd Records, 1927–1979, MS 13363, Box 63/2(b); Bruce and Penny Griffing to Grounds, 4 December 1959, 'Griffing House Canberra, Correspondence', Grounds, Romberg and Boyd Records, 1927–1979, Box 63/1; 'Griffing House, 42 and 44 Vasey Crescent, Campbell, Canberra', Papers of John Philip (Manuscript), National Library of Australia, MS 9801, Box 1.



cultivating and growing Australian native plants, and took a leading role in the discussions.<sup>13</sup> The Vasey Crescent Group owners decided to aim for consistency by planting native gardens to present a 'continuum' to passers-by. While each garden was to be designed by its owners, it was expected that 'individual talent and enthusiasm' would provide diversity.<sup>14</sup> Eric Wilson, writing for *Australian Home Beautiful*, noted how this undertaking had 'involved a great deal of discussion, mutual consideration and effort on the part of the three families'.<sup>15</sup>

The Philips believed that it was important to maintain an Australian theme in the street planting. Upon hearing that planners from Parks and Gardens were intending to plant pinoaks in Vasey Crescent, John contacted them to say that the three houses 'were being planned to have a certain unity which might have a distinctly Australian flavour about it', and that the owners believed that Australian trees such as *Eucalyptus maculosa* would be more appropriate. Having received confirmation that their preferred trees would be planted in the street, Philip wrote to Grounds to inform him, adding: 'I hope this does not conflict with your ideas!'<sup>16</sup>

There was, however, disagreement between the clients over one planning issue. The Philips proposed combining all three driveways into one road that followed the site contours. In March 1960, H. R. Stafford from Grounds, Romberg and Boyd prepared a site plan showing how this might work, and sent it to the Blakers and the Griffings for consideration. But, to Philip's disappointment, the proposal did not meet with his neighbours' approval, mainly because of uncertainties over the arrangement if any of the houses were sold in the future.<sup>17</sup>

Another form of collaboration in the Vasey Crescent Group was that the three houses were constructed from a unified palette of materials, colours and textures, all of which adopted characteristics of the adjacent bushland of Canberra Nature Park.<sup>18</sup> Wherever possible, Grounds and Boyd specified natural, 'rough' materials, finishes and colours for the exterior and interior of the houses, as described by Hamann:

The interiors of all these houses mirrored the exterior. Walls were left unplastered and unbagged...Ceilings were of the most elaborate mitred

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13 During the 1930s, while still a child, Frances established an early native garden at her Melbourne home, propagated from seeds obtained from her aunt's property in the Gippsland hills. She maintained a glasshouse, and trips to the country were punctuated with diversions to local nurseries to supplement her collection.

14 'Griffing House, 42 and 44 Vasey Crescent, Campbell, Canberra'.

15 Wilson, 'Good-Mannered Houses', 7.

16 John Philip to Grounds, 17 March 1960, Papers of John Philip.

17 'It seems that our future neighbours are unimpressed with the virtues of the combined drive, and that this proposal will be abandoned. Personally, we think that an excellent opportunity for unified site treatment is thus lost; but we can see that the combined drive has practical disadvantages for the other houses, particularly the Blakers.' John Philip to Grounds, 28 March 1960, 'Philip House Canberra'.

18 Roy Grounds, De Berg Tapes, National Library of Australia, Recorded in Melbourne, 11 October 1971.

planking, varnished and running through the window walls to connect with the soffit areas outside. Paintwork was virtually absent. The Canberra houses had black painted iron posts running up to the fascias, but it is difficult to recall paintwork anywhere else on these designs. Where wood fittings occurred, they were either varnished or limed.<sup>19</sup>



**Figure 4.3 Philip House, living room, looking east**

Photograph: Candida Griffiths (daughter of Frances Philip and John Philip)

Affinity with the landscape and the belief that buildings should be ‘an extension of nature’ were common themes in Grounds’ domestic architecture. The origins of this approach can be traced back to a number of sources. One of these was his knowledge of the appearance of surfaces and colours in sunlight. When Japan entered World War II, Grounds joined the Royal Australian Air Force. From 1942 to 1943, he was Area Camouflage Officer with HQNEA Unit. His Reporting Officer stated that, in addition to having ‘tremendous drive’ and being ‘smart and punctilious on matters of discipline’, Grounds ‘possessed a very intimate knowledge of the requirements of the area’ and was ‘a good officer in Works on Camouflage duties’.<sup>20</sup>

19 Hamann, *Modern Architecture in Melbourne: The Architecture of Grounds, Romberg and Boyd, 1927–1971*, 62–4, 239.

20 Royal Australian Air Force Record, ‘Grounds R. B.’, National Archives of Australia, NAA: A9300, Grounds R. B., 27, 31, 32.



The art of camouflage, or concealment through deception, was a multidisciplinary activity that combined knowledge and skills from science and the arts. Zoologists studied camouflage patterns and disruptive colouration in the animal world, physicists examined the physical effects of light and colour, while chemists experimented with dyes and paints. Camouflage was especially suited to architects, artists and photographers, with a number of these working in this area during World War II.<sup>21</sup> One of these was Walter Bunning, who, like Grounds, prepared working drawings of camouflage installations.

Recurring themes throughout Grounds' life were the strong emotional link that he forged with natural settings and places, and the desire to spend time there to recuperate from stress. Immediately after returning from active duties, he spent two years working as an orchardist and dairy farmer in country Victoria.<sup>22</sup> Grounds claimed that his affinity with nature became stronger in later years because of his association with scientists on the Academy of Science building. That was when he purchased 'Penders', a coastal property on the NSW South Coast with 'nearly five miles of waterfrontage', to which he escaped 'for a week every month, and a month in the summer'. Part of the appeal was the seclusion: writing to Philip, Grounds explained how he and Betty had 'just returned from a month's vacation in complete isolation in our forest'.<sup>23</sup> The other attraction to Penders was his desire to return the land to its natural state: Grounds claimed that he 'bought it to prevent subdivision and to return it back to the wonders of nature, a part of Australia that would for all time remain that way'.<sup>24</sup> After his death in 1981, Grounds' remains were returned to his coastal retreat, in accordance with his wishes.<sup>25</sup>

While Grounds' reasons for merging these houses into their natural settings are clear, the same cannot be said for Boyd, who, after all, had based his polychromatic colour scheme for the Fenner House on Vicki and Marilyn's paintboxes. It is possible that he had mellowed in his approach to colour by the time he took over the Vasey Crescent houses from Grounds. Another factor was that Betty Grounds—who had been involved with the interiors of the Academy of Science building—seemed to have the final say on colours for the

21 Among the architects were Walter Bunning, John D. Moore and Leslie Wilkinson, while those from art backgrounds included William Dobell, Eric Ernest Jolliffe, Daryl Lindsay, Keeper of the Prints, National Gallery Melbourne, and Lewis McCubbin, Director, National Gallery of Adelaide. The photographer Max Dupain was another camouflage officer. National Archives of Australia, NAA: A5954/69, NAA: A453/1, 1942/28/2298.

22 Hamann, *Modern Architecture in Melbourne: The Architecture of Grounds, Romberg and Boyd, 1927–1971*, 45.

23 Grounds to John Philip, 29 January 1969, Papers of John Philip.

24 Roy Grounds, *De Berg Tapes*, National Library of Australia, Recorded in Melbourne, 11 October 1971.

25 'At Penders, the spirit of Sir Roy Grounds still roams at large. In the moody surroundings of his beach retreat on the New South Wales South Coast, strange upturned tree sculptures stand guard like pagan charms. With single stone eyes, they watch the spot where Grounds's ashes were sprinkled in March, and the unoccupied house, a stylised tee-pee of fibreglass and nylon sailcloth which has stood for 12 years.' Geoff Strong, 'Centre of Contention', *The Age* (8 August 1981): 19–20.

Vasey Crescent houses. At one stage, Boyd wrote to Penny Griffing, stating: 'Mrs. Grounds was not enthusiastic about any of the colours in the carpet range you mentioned.'<sup>26</sup> But whether it was due to those reasons, or simply because he wanted Grounds' design intent to remain intact, Boyd exerted as much control over colour as his partner. Most of Boyd's efforts on the Vasey Crescent houses seemed to be concerned with maintaining visual continuity between the three houses, and between them and the adjacent bushland. A large part of the success of this venture can be attributed to the persistence of John Philip, who regularly checked with Boyd to ensure that the houses would present an integrated appearance.

Immediately after signing the building contract, Philip wrote to Boyd—who had formally taken over responsibility for the Vasey Crescent houses from Grounds—expressing his concern about details that he believed might affect the external appearance of the houses. One of these was the colour of the mortar. When visiting houses under construction in Canberra, the Philips had observed that the predominant mortar colour was mustard, which they thought would clash 'quite horribly with the pale grey of Besser blocks'. They asked Boyd if there was any way of adjusting the mortar colour to provide a closer match.<sup>27</sup> Writing to Dalheim Constructions the next day to confirm that they were the successful tenderers, Boyd wasted no time in asking them to

[p]lease be careful to match the finishes, especially in the Besser block work, with those on the Griffing House next door, which has started a little ahead of yours. Also the colours when we finally get around to them will be matched. We would be grateful if, all along, you would keep in mind that the three houses in the row should present a unified appearance.<sup>28</sup>

Boyd replied to the Philips that he knew 'the normal colour in Canberra is bad, due to the yellow-brown colour of the sand', but regretted that there was no way of changing this without resorting to expensive colour mixes. He recommended that, as the Griffing House was already under construction, it was more important to match the mortar colour to that.<sup>29</sup> The Philips stated that they were happy with this solution—as long as their mortar did in fact match that of the Griffings'. To see if this was the case, the Philips inspected another house in Vasey Crescent that was being constructed by Dalheim Constructions, and noted that the mortar there was more mustard in colour than that mixed

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26 Boyd to Penny Griffing, 13 December 1960, 'Griffing House Canberra'. Betty Grounds had previously been involved in the interior of the Australian Academy of Science building, for which she had selected light fittings.

27 John Philip to Boyd, 25 August 1960, 'Philip House Canberra'.

28 Boyd to Dalheim Constructions, 26 July 1960, 'Philip House Canberra'.

29 Boyd to John Philip, 29 August 1960, 'Philip House Canberra'.

by Meli and Eglitis, the builders of the Griffing House.<sup>30</sup> Boyd wrote to Dalheim Constructions again, stressing the importance of matching 'the effect of the Besser block work with Griffing's', and also 'the colour of the mortar which, of course, depends on the colour of the sand'. He instructed Dalheim Constructions to check with the other builders as to 'what sand they used, and endeavour to get the same'.<sup>31</sup>

In keeping with the rigour imposed on the exterior, the interior colours of the Philip House were limited to a few tones. Great care was taken to ensure that nothing would clash with the exterior, or with the natural tones of the bushland setting. Carpet and tiles were a soft teal blue, walls were unpainted concrete blocks or blond-coloured vertical ash boarding, and ceilings were ash. Much of the furniture consisted of natural materials: the Robin Day-designed steel-framed chairs, for instance, were covered in leather hide. Eric Wilson, writing for *Australian Home Beautiful*, noted that the only accents of colour to the interior were the satin chrome light fittings, copper flue and pans, white porcelain dishes and coffee pots, and books.<sup>32</sup>



**Figure 4.4 Philip House, living room, looking south-west**

Photograph: Candida Griffiths

30 John Philip to Boyd, 31 August 1960, 'Philip House Canberra'.

31 Boyd to Dalheim Constructions, 5 September 1960, 'Philip House Canberra'.

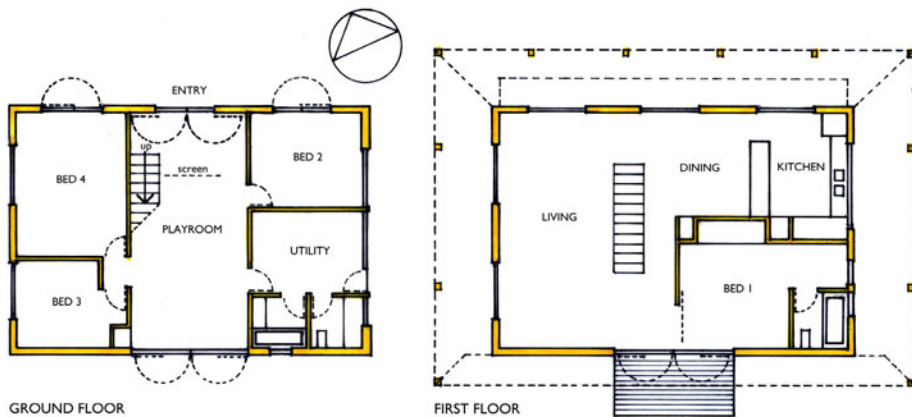
32 Eric Wilson, 'Style is Timeless', *Australian Home Beautiful* (December 1963): 11.

This coordinated approach to natural and muted colours, with an emphasis on a blue–grey theme, was continued through the interiors of all the Vasey Crescent houses. Boyd reminded Penny Griffing that '[t]he building itself will be, of course, grey and natural-timber', and that '[g]rey on the floor will maintain this background scheme'. The Griffings were instructed to 'keep to greys in all floor coverings and to blues and greens in all your furnishings—throughout the whole house'. And in case she still did not have the message, he repeated that the colour scheme was: 'BACKGROUND: Grey and light natural timber. FOREGROUND: Blue-Green and dark natural timber.' Such was the control exerted by the architects that the clients were further instructed to 'banish reds, oranges, golds', but were permitted to introduce these colours 'accidentally' into the spaces in the form of ephemeral items such as 'flowers or books or a dress!'<sup>33</sup>

## Physics at Home

In the lovely austere world of mathematics there are no uncertainties. There are no people, no classes, no warm or cold, no hate or spite, no time, no death. There are only numbers.

— Norman Mussen, Structural Engineer, Philip House<sup>34</sup>



**Figure 4.5 Philip House, floor plans**

Image: redrawn by the author from Grounds, Romberg and Boyd. Courtesy of Victoria Grounds and the Robin Boyd Foundation

<sup>33</sup> Boyd to Penny Griffing, 13 December 1960, 'Griffing House Canberra Correspondence'.

<sup>34</sup> Norman Mussen, 'There are Only Numbers', *Architecture and Arts* 1, no. 1 (July 1952): 23. Mussen was a structural engineer and senior lecturer in the School of Architecture at Melbourne University during the 1950s. He was the structural engineer for the Philip House. See Fritz Suendermann to Boyd, 23 March 1962, 'Philip House Canberra'.

As an environmental physicist, John Philip was perfectly capable of discussing how transformations of matter and energy in the material world related to house design, but his input did not stop there. Philip had no hesitation in discussing any aspect of architecture that he believed warranted his attention. Writing to brief Boyd—who was about to come to Canberra to meet with the Philips—that their ‘sometimes difficult’ client was fired up about the window heads not being flush with the ceiling, Grounds, Romberg and Boyd’s supervising architect, Fritz Suendermann, warned Boyd that ‘[u]ndoubtedly you will have the pleasure of being lectured by John Philip on various aspects of architecture, ranging from “Spec-Builders’ Aesthetics” to “Beaumaris Romantic”’.<sup>35</sup>

In the 1950s, Philip was one of a small number of scientists across the world who realised the potential of mathematical physics to contribute to environmental issues. His research, through which he revolutionised scientific understanding and became a world authority, involved thermodynamics: the way in which water moves through soil. By providing the key physical concepts and mathematics required for a unified understanding of hydrological principles, Philip presented a generation of scientists and engineers with clear sets of principles to maximise the use of available water. His work was especially important in dry countries such as Australia, where he studied unsaturated soil, whose pores contained both air and water.<sup>36</sup>

Philip was a child prodigy and an outstanding mathematician. Qualifying for university at the age of thirteen, he was considered too young to attend, and, after filling in two more years, attended the University of Melbourne and graduated as a Bachelor of Civil Engineering at age nineteen. In 1960, he was awarded a Doctorate of Science (physics) by the same university. David Smiles recalled that mathematics provided Philip with ‘both his language and his logic’.<sup>37</sup> Earlier in his career the problems he was working with were too complex for computers of the time, so Philip developed his own methodology using a simple hand calculator. He never used a modern computer and had a habit of performing extremely complex calculations while lying on the floor. His daughter, Candida Griffiths, described how her father viewed mathematics ‘as a very beautiful thing: as you or I might think of something that we’ve just drawn as very beautiful, he really, really saw great beauty in his calculations’. She also recalled her father’s delight in the momentary observation of a ‘beautiful number’ on the speedometer of the family car.<sup>38</sup>

35 ‘I accept all your explanations for Philip’s queries and I know he can be very difficult’. Boyd to Suendermann, 20 June 1961, ‘Philip House Canberra’; and Suendermann to Boyd, 6 June 1961, ‘Philip House Canberra’.

36 One practical outcome of his theoretical work was the practice of planting trees in dry locations to improve local climates.

37 David Smiles, John Philip’s Commemorative Gathering, Australian Academy of Science, 18 July 1999, Papers of John Philip.

38 Papers of John Philip; Candida Griffiths, Interview by the author, 27 June 2008.



But for Philip, numbers reached profound significance as tools for investigating order in the physical world:

The great task of science reduces ultimately to the search for order: to discern the regularities in the bewildering universe around us—firstly so that we may gain understanding of it and our place in it; and secondly so that we may use this understanding to manage both our world and ourselves more wisely.

That this quest for order was common to both physics and biology was exemplified, for Philip, by the fact that the ‘two great generalisations’ of science—in physics, the second law of thermodynamics, and, in biology, the principle of evolution by natural selection—both represented a search for order. Philip’s summary of Charles Darwin’s theory of natural selection described it as ‘the process whereby organisms automatically evolve into ever more highly ordered forms of ever-increasing complexity...The organism with the talent of coping with the environment automatically inherits the environment; the one without it automatically disappears’.<sup>39</sup>

Philip displayed a keen interest in the arts, listing his hobbies as ‘reading, writing, architecture, cooking’. John and Frances were both involved with the commissioning of Ken Woolley’s F. C. Pye Laboratory at the CSIRO, Black Mountain. John’s description of the completed building indicated how he viewed architecture: ‘It also seems to us to be unique in other, more human, senses. It is a delight to work in this building. It is a pleasure to the eye and satisfying to the mind to find oneself in a building combining beauty and logic, humanity and efficiency.’<sup>40</sup>

In the late 1980s, Fellows of the Academy of Science became concerned by reports that the concrete domed roof of Eero Saarinen’s Kresge Auditorium at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Boston was beginning to fragment due to a continuous cycle of freezing and thawing in winter. Believing that the cold nights and sunny days of Canberra might have the same effect on Grounds’ dome, the academy asked John Philip to investigate. Philip organised the installation of temperature and water-content sensors in the roof, and, through data obtained from these, he established that ‘the temperature in the

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39 John Philip, Undated draft script for ‘Insight’, ABC ‘Physics and Biology’, National Library of Australia, ‘Philip House Canberra’.

40 John Philip, ‘The Elements—Earth, Air, Fire, Water’, [Special feature on Ken Woolley’s F.C. Pye Laboratory], *The Canberra Times* (30 August 1966). Candida Philip and Toss Gascoigne (a former CSIRO employee) both recall that the basic configuration of the F. C. Pye Laboratory was first sketched by Frances Philip. Candida Griffiths, Interview by the author, 27 June 2008; and Toss Gascoigne, In discussion with the author, 2008.

concrete ceiling below the copper roof never dropped below 5°C during the frostiest nights'.<sup>41</sup> Philip's passion for architecture resulted in an invitation to be a Sulman Award jurist in 1964.<sup>42</sup>

Philip approached the design of his own house with the same combination of passion and exactitude that he displayed in other endeavours. Absolutely nothing was taken for granted, or left to chance. Every possible physical aspect of the house was calibrated, recorded, compared and discussed with the architects to achieve, from Philip's point of view, the optimum result in terms of aesthetics, human comfort and the most efficient use of resources. His energy, commitment and level of engagement throughout the entire design process were extraordinary. In late 1959, before they had engaged their architect, Philip had already fired off a number of letters to the National Capital Development Commission, offering his comments on the planning of tennis courts and preschool centres in Campbell, and to the Department of the Interior to seek their assurance that a tree in Vasey Crescent would not be damaged by footpath construction. Throughout the design and documentation phases, he wrote long, highly detailed letters—many containing alternative sketches and extensive lists of items for consideration—to Grounds, Romberg and Boyd on a weekly basis.<sup>43</sup>

Candida Griffiths attributed her parents' decision to build on an elevated site to Frances Philip's childhood memories of holidays in the Gippsland hills. The sloping land of Campbell was ideal for the Philips' requirements, and they walked 'the length and breadth' of the suburb investigating possible sites. One street that aroused their interest was Vasey Crescent, which at that time was just a dirt track. On one site they propped a ladder against an old yellow-box tree to confirm potential views of the future lake. At a later stage in the design process, Frances persuaded Boyd to climb a ladder to confirm the views that would be obtained from the upper level.<sup>44</sup>

There is no record that Grounds—who Frances thought was 'a bit of an arrogant so-and-so'<sup>45</sup> compared with the more approachable Boyd—was ever asked to perform such tasks. With his Academy of Science building having just won the Sulman Medal, and with a string of commissions for scientists in Canberra on

41 Ross Taylor, John Philip's Commemorative Gathering, Australian Academy of Science, 18 July 1999, Papers of John Philip.

42 'D. J. Philip' was listed as a member of the Sulman Award jury in 1964. Presumably this referred to John Philip, whose initials were actually 'J. R.'. Andrew Metcalf, *Architecture in Transition: The Sulman Award 1932–1996* (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, 1997), 96.

43 Letters dated August 1959, Papers of John Philip.

44 Candida Griffiths, Interview by the author, 27 June 2008. The reference to Boyd climbing the ladder is from Serle, *Robin Boyd: A Life*, 192.

45 Serle, *Robin Boyd: A Life*.

his drawing boards, Grounds was carving out a niche in the scientific world.<sup>46</sup> It is important to note, however, that in spite of his growing connections to the scientific community, Grounds remained suspicious of those within his profession who believed that science represented the future of architecture. Rather than welcoming scientific progress as a source of new opportunities and directions, he saw it as a potential form of control. Worse still, he believed that the obsession with science was an indication that architects had lost touch with their principal purpose: to design spaces for people.<sup>47</sup>

Grounds thought that Le Corbusier never really believed a house was 'a machine for living in'; it was only 'a nice catch phrase' that had caught on with a lot of people. For Grounds, the logical outcome of Le Corbusier's aphorism was that architecture was a form of scientific experiment on humanity, whereas, in reality, humanity was made up of a variety of individuals, each with their own specific requirements. Moreover, these requirements, in spite of technological progress, were 'much the same today as they were about two thousand years ago'. Emphatically rejecting popular scientific jargon, Grounds claimed that clients 'want to be left alone and not pushed around by a group of scientific architects who are trying to use clichés which have not a great deal to do with a human being but have a great deal to do with a scientific attitude gone pseudo'.<sup>48</sup>

For Grounds, consideration of the individual client's needs was more important than the application of overarching scientific principles. But what did this mean in practice? Grounds perceived his domestic architectural consultancy as being akin to that of a neighbourhood physician—a situation reinforced by his belief that clients went to an architect only when they were 'in trouble', wanting to do something that they were not capable of doing for themselves:

You go to a doctor when you're ill, you go to a solicitor when you're in trouble and you go to a dentist when you've got a toothache, you go to an architect when you want something done that you'd like to do yourself but you can't. You're in pain, you need help, you need advice, you need assistance, so you've got to act like a doctor to help them over a hurdle, they'd do it themselves, otherwise.<sup>49</sup>

Grounds was a specialist who would listen to clients' needs and attempt to solve them. In an interview with Hamann, he described himself as a 'sociologist', interpreting people's needs and 'painting pictures' of his clients in wood, stone,

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46 Other commissions in Canberra that followed the Australian Academy of Science building were a group of townhouses in Forrest for 'Academics Anonymous' (which included Grounds), the Phytotron Building at the CSIRO, Black Mountain, and the botany and zoology buildings at The Australian National University, Acton.

47 'Three Sided Debate', *Architecture and Arts* 1, no. 1 (July 1952): 13.

48 Ibid.

49 Roy Grounds, De Berg Tapes, National Library of Australia, Recorded in Melbourne, 11 October 1971.

brick or concrete. This was essentially how Grounds saw his role on the Academy of Science project, describing himself as ‘the instrument of [the scientists] needs, the professional instrument of their hopes, their wants, their needs’.<sup>50</sup> And, in spite of his strong personality and reputation for being something of a bully, Grounds treated his consultations with clients seriously. He would arrange an initial meeting, often asking the whole family to attend. During this he would take copious notes, and make a determined effort to ascertain their individual requirements, such as household routines and entertaining patterns. This initial consultation was often followed up by a phone call from Grounds, or even a subsequent, unannounced visit. These could occur at any hour: some clients recalled him phoning them late at night, another received a visit at 2 am, while others woke up to find their newly commissioned architect standing outside their front door before breakfast, notebook in hand, ready to study their morning routines.<sup>51</sup>

The first Canberra ‘consultation’ with the Philips took place in late 1959 in a house they were renting at 22 Longstaff Street, Lyneham. At that meeting Grounds recorded the names and ages of the children, and the family’s hobbies, lifestyle and requirements, in a small, lined writing pad. These notes, later typed up back in the office, included the following:

One car

Mr[s]. Philip is a painter

Mrs. Philip enjoys work in a ‘no work’ studied carelessness garden

Mr. Philip avoids gardening, but is a good cook—and does it—most of it

Likely to entertain over meals

Table tennis—in a Rumpus Room

Radio, TV, etc.—quite incidental

Up to 2 cars in basement

+ table tennis

+ a workshop (future)

+ access to kitchen

50 Roy Grounds, Interview by Conrad Hamman, January 1978, cited by Hamann, *Modern Architecture in Melbourne: The Architecture of Grounds, Romberg and Boyd, 1927–1971*, 53; and *ibid.*

51 Hamann, *Modern Architecture in Melbourne: The Architecture of Grounds, Romberg and Boyd, 1927–1971*, 51–3.

One of the first questions that Grounds asked his new clients was how much money they had. In the Philips' case, this amounted to £9000—or, depending on how John's CSIRO salary details eventuated, possibly only £8500. For this reason, economies of scale and materials were of primary importance.<sup>52</sup> The compact design of the Philip House seems to have been established from that first meeting: Grounds' notes describe a '2½ to 3-storey house towards the rear of the site', and contain four 'thumbnail' sketches of a rectangular, two or three-storey house roofed by a shallow gable. Calculations of the floor area—'19.76 plus porch and garage'—resulted in a preliminary estimate of £10 700. The Philips explained how they were embarking on this project five years before they could really afford it, but they did not want that to prejudice the size of the house. They hoped to be able to build the 'bare bones' first and add on later.<sup>53</sup>

A short time later, the Philips received preliminary sketch designs, drawn by James McCormick. These were very similar in layout to the thumbnails. The Philips' response, sent in December 1959, was a portent of what was to come. Ten pages long, it was extremely detailed and included calculations of sun angles and heating costs and alternative plans—the last drawn by Frances and notated by John.<sup>54</sup> The clients told Grounds that they appreciated the architecture on aesthetic principles, but believed that there were 'quite formidable practical objections to the concept' as it stood. They requested major alterations, implementation of which would 'demand quite radical changes from the present plan'.

The changes were informed by John's belief in the importance of the sun, from which, he wrote, 'all life on earth depends ultimately on...for its supply of free energy and order'.<sup>55</sup> They were grouped under two categories: 'The Roof, the Balcony and the Sun', and 'Relocation of Activities Within the House'. All proposed changes were based on the idea that passive solar design should provide adequate levels of comfort without resorting to artificial heating or cooling.

The cantilevered eaves were the first area of criticism. While Boyd in his two designs for the Fenner House had incorporated significant eaves overhangs on the northern side of the blocks, Grounds had proposed 1.8 m deep eaves on all sides of the three Vasey Crescent houses. As there was no functional requirement for such a deep overhang on the south side, and limited requirements on the east and west where the sun is predominantly at a low angle, it appears that the protective nature of the roof was a symbolic gesture more than a practical solution.

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52 Candida Griffiths, Interview by the author, 27 June 2008.

53 'Philip House Canberra Correspondence'.

54 Candida Griffiths, Interview by the author, 27 June 2008.

55 John Philip, Undated draft script for 'Insight', ABC 'Physics and Biology'.



John Philip was concerned that the continuous 1.8 m wide eaves would not only ‘make the house inordinately gloomy and chilly’, but would also result in ‘a very serious and continuing economic loss which results from the neglect of winter heat supply from the sun’. He calculated that, in regard to the north wall, ‘there would be no penetration of sun into the house at midday between about August 25 and April 17’, while ‘[e]ven in mid-winter (June 21) at midday only the bottom half of the window would receive the sun’. Philip provided evidence of the savings that would be incurred by reducing the depth of the eaves:

It is, for example, easily shown that 20 square feet of sunlit window supply, on the average, 1 kilowatt of heat [1 radiator bar]. Reducing the northern overhang from 6 feet [1.8 m] to 2 feet [600 mm] would save of the order of £70 per annum in winter heating bills *without* admitting more summer sun into the house than we should desire.<sup>56</sup>

The Philips were not the only ones to object to the deep roof overhang. In early December 1959, all three Vasey Crescent clients wrote to Grounds requesting that the cantilever be reduced in depth. The simultaneous timing of their requests indicates collaboration between the clients on this issue, and it is most likely that John Philip—whose submission was the most detailed and scientific—played a key role in orchestrating their coordinated responses.<sup>57</sup>

The second major issue raised by the Philips was the location of activities within their three-storeyed house. At the initial meeting with Grounds, they had discussed a traditional configuration with living areas on the lower levels and bedrooms above. But after considering the preliminary sketches, John Philip’s scientific background prevailed, and he asked for the layout to be amended. As Candida Griffiths explained, ‘my father was a physicist, and very aware of the fact that heat rises, and wanted to use the physics of the way heat worked rather than working against it’. This meant placing the living areas, where the family spent most waking hours, in a position to benefit from that principle. ‘So they said to Grounds “no, that’s not what we want, we want it to be an upside-down house”. And Roy Grounds said, “well I suppose you know what you’re doing”, and wasn’t particularly thrilled, but I suppose realised he had to back down, because they knew what they wanted.’ Philip no doubt felt that his insistence was justified when an article in *Australian Home Beautiful* titled ‘Sun Keeps Heating Bills Low’ described the success of the passive solar design:

<sup>56</sup> John Philip to Grounds, 4 December 1959, ‘Philip House Canberra Correspondence’.

<sup>57</sup> A letter from the Griffings to Grounds was dated the same day, while Catherine Blakers wrote on 2 December 1959. ‘Griffing House Canberra Correspondence’; and ‘Blakers House Canberra’.

'On bright midwinter days the temperature on the top floor can top 70 deg. without any warmth from the oil heater. This contribution from the sun has had an important part in keeping the Philip fuel bill low.'<sup>58</sup>

A later innovation, introduced by John Philip after the house was completed, was related to the same principle. Aware that the combination of rising warm air and solar heat gain through the metal roof would make the upper level—where the family was primarily located during the daytime—intolerably hot in summer, Philip installed a sprinkler system on the roof to cool the surface temperature. This was not, however, a success; on the hottest days, many neighbours operated sprinklers in their gardens, and the increasing demand placed on the water supply lowered the pressure to a level where the cooling system was ineffective.<sup>59</sup>

In January 1960, Grounds thanked his clients for their 'very orderly tabulation of criticisms', and explained how they had substantially revised the plans in accordance with most of their objections, whilst 'maintaining the essential character and reducing the cost'.<sup>60</sup> Revised drawings, prepared by Pat Moroney, showed the activities relocated to specific levels according to the Philips' instructions. Grounds reminded his clients of the subsequent, unorthodox result—that the entrance to the house was now through the children's playroom on the lower level. The Philips had already decided that they would solve this problem by installing an operable screen to block off the playroom when they invited guests over for dinner parties.<sup>61</sup>

In accordance with the clients' instructions, the revised sketch drawings showed a reduction in the roof eaves overhang on the northern and the southern elevations from 1.8 m to 900 mm.<sup>62</sup> In spite of this, however, Grounds, Romberg and Boyd were reluctant to change this detail on the working drawings, and retained the eaves at a consistent 1.8 m depth all around, with a cut-out opening over the northern windows. Philip persuaded the architects to increase the size of this aperture to extend beyond the width of the windows to allow for the angle of the sun, resulting in the final configuration where the cut-out extended to the line of the return walls. He also convinced Grounds, Romberg and Boyd to reduce the overhang to 900 mm on the southern elevation.

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58 Eric Wilson, 'Good-Mannered Houses'. The Blakers and Griffing houses also followed passive solar design principles. The Griffings discussed their house in this regard under 'Heating, Griffing House, 44 Vasey Crescent, Campbell, Canberra', Papers of John Philip.

59 Candida Griffiths, Interview by the author, 27 June 2008.

60 Grounds to John Philip, 15 January 1960, 'Philip House Canberra Correspondence'.

61 A double-hinged screen, constructed of an ash frame with Japanese-style blind, was hinged on one side to the stringer and handrail of the stair. This was rolled across to screen off the playroom—which was essentially a second living area—on occasions when guests were arriving at the house via the 'formal', front entry. On most days, the screen was folded back, and the Philips entered the house through the laundry to the east. Candida Griffiths, Interview by the author, 27 June 2008.

62 'Philip House Canberra Correspondence'.

The Philips then focused their energies on the resolution of various details—and errors—in the revised plans. These included the optimum utilisation of internal space to avoid waste—for this, they specified dimensions down to 10 mm—provision of adequate natural light to all rooms, acoustic treatment to avoid noise transmission via the internal staircase, installation of a prefabricated acoustic phone booth, provision of impermeable sills to cope with condensation on windows, and the inclusion of adequate insulation. John Philip noted the incorrect orientation of north points on three of the plans, reminding the architects that ‘the block faces slightly east of north, not west of north’.<sup>63</sup>

A number of concerns expressed by the Philips related to aesthetic principles, particularly to maintaining visual compatibility between the three houses. After examining a preliminary site plan of the Vasey Crescent houses, the Philips noticed that there was a difference of 300 mm between the proposed floor level of their own house and that of the Griffing House next-door. John Philip asked Grounds if this disparity would be obvious—‘for example, via the non-alignment of window levels’. A reply from Grounds, Romberg and Boyd reassured their increasingly obsessive clients that, due to the relative locations of the houses on their sites, the 300 mm difference would not cause visual conflict. Having already expressed a preference for the concrete-block external walls to be laid in a ‘stack bond with the long emphasis vertical’ to provide a ‘rather desirable vertical emphasis to the house’—presumably to match the verticality implied by the timber posts—the Philips further stated that they preferred the blocks to be hollow Besser blocks because they were ‘both cheaper and better thermally’.<sup>64</sup> Another issue that concerned the clients was how their architects intended to treat the detail where the eaves—to be constructed from timber boarding—reduced in width from 1.8 m to 900 mm.<sup>65</sup>

But by early 1961 the Philips’ robust, ‘hands-on’ approach had so exceeded normal levels of client involvement that it began to be interpreted by their architects as interference. In January 1961, Suendermann wrote a file note instructing that ‘Philip [was] to be told not to discuss anything with builder!’ Later that year Suendermann’s patience finally ran out when he received a phone call from Frances on a Sunday evening:

[L]ast Sunday, 8.15 pm Mrs. Philip rang, saying the whole of the first floor construction has been done wrongly, the whole house is now a mess and John was stamping up and down the floor, cursing Grounds, Romberg and Boyd. When I found out that they had these detail drawings since

63 John Philip to Grounds, 15 February 1960, ‘Philip House Canberra Correspondence’.

64 John Philip to Grounds, 28 March 1960; Grounds, Romberg & Boyd reply, 31 March 1960; Pat Moroney’s file notes after speaking to Philip on the telephone, 12 April 1960, 13 April 1960, ‘Philip House Canberra Correspondence’.

65 The solution was a part–45-degree mitred joint that squared off in line with the return wall.

August last year, I could not help but blowing my top and telling them one or two things that have been on my mind for a long time. But after that mild storm we are all good friends again.<sup>66</sup>

## Conflating the Paradigms

There is no record that Grounds ever discussed the Vasey Crescent houses in regard to architectural style. But there was nothing unusual about this: he rarely talked about such issues. Grounds' overall attitude towards architecture was based on a 'commonsense', 'workman-like' approach to problem solving that had been instilled early in his career.

Returning to Australia in the early 1930s after living overseas for four years, Grounds saw the architecture of his native country with an increased awareness: 'I saw it with a fresh eye completely and I couldn't understand why people didn't build buildings according to the climate and our own materials instead of aping buildings that had been done in England or in France or in Italy.'<sup>67</sup> Associated with this was his realisation that some earlier Australian buildings functioned well in relation to the local climate. This reinforced in Grounds a preference for tried and true, traditional building forms, and he began to adopt a select group of these elements—gabled roofs, verandahs, vertical posts, pergolas and louvred timber shutters—to incorporate within his domestic architecture. As a result, many of Grounds' houses from the late 1930s through to the 1950s established subtle visual connections to 'old colonial Georgian and rural vernacular' buildings.<sup>68</sup>

Grounds' commonsense attitude to domestic design extended through to building construction, for which he favoured well-established, traditional practices such as bricks, timber-framed windows and 'V'-jointed timber boarding. For him, new materials and building techniques made no sense when existing methods did the job adequately—and often for less cost.<sup>69</sup> It was all about finding the right balance between tradition and modernity: too much of one or the other and the integrity of the idea was lost.

One of the challenges facing Grounds—and other architects with modernist inclinations—was how to convince their clients to accept new aesthetic paradigms. Hamann saw a tactical advantage in the way in which Grounds sometimes disguised certain modernist ideas and innovations—ideas that would

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66 Suendermann to Boyd, 6 June 1961, 'Philip House Canberra Correspondence'.

67 Roy Grounds, De Berg Tapes, National Library of Australia, Recorded in Melbourne, 11 October 1971.

68 Hamann, *Modern Architecture in Melbourne: The Architecture of Grounds, Romberg and Boyd, 1927–1971*, 67.

69 *Ibid.*, 55.

have been too radical for some clients—‘among warm and traditional forms and materials’.<sup>70</sup> Grounds had no need to resort to such tactics with the Philip House or with the Vasey Crescent Group in general. The clients for these houses were receptive to modern aesthetics and materials, and the raw concrete-block walls of all three houses were anything but traditional. But this dialectic between ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ is evident throughout the Philip House. Although it is generally regarded to be a ‘modern’ house, the Philips nevertheless believed that it was informed, to some extent, by historical precedents. John and Frances Philip were ‘very much attracted to the look of the old pub, and...liked the honesty of the old rural outbuildings...the posts, the veranda’.<sup>71</sup> They saw connections between these structures and the house that Grounds and Boyd designed for them. They also saw parallels between the way in which country homesteads were approached and the way that their house—set back some distance from the street—was approached. The Philips’ postwar experience of living in an old hospital building in Deniliquin, NSW, had some bearing on the matching pairs of wide double doors that allowed the ground floor of their house to be opened up.<sup>72</sup>

There are three formal aspects of the Philip House that could be compared with historical architectural precedents, particularly with those of nineteenth-century Georgian buildings. One was the use of simple, rectangular building forms and symmetrical facades. A further characteristic was the row of vertical timber posts around the perimeter of the roof and floor cantilevers. These created the impression of a colonnade—like the posts supporting verandahs on buildings such as Rouse Hill House. The third reference to Georgian precedents was the way in which Grounds ordered the fenestration by vertical alignment of the openings through the ground and first-floor levels.<sup>73</sup>

It is indicative of the subtlety of Grounds’ designs for the Vasey Crescent houses—and of the fine line that existed in his domestic work between modernist interpretation of historical themes and outright stylism—that the Philips made various comments in this regard that, on the surface, appear to conflict. They initially acknowledged that certain stylistic influences existed in their house. Directly after receiving McCormick’s preliminary sketch design drawings, John Philip wrote to Grounds, saying: ‘We appreciate your imaginative and poetic scheme to provide a unity to the three houses by means of the roof forms with

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>71</sup> Candida Griffiths, Interview by the author, 27 June 2008.

<sup>72</sup> Griffiths recalled how the ‘Australian building that was an old hospital really influenced them, and the fact that the doors opened and they went straight out onto the veranda, that was something of enormous importance’. Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Hamann refers to the use of these devices to produce a ‘Georgian allusion’ in the houses of both Grounds and Boyd. Hamann, *Modern Architecture in Melbourne: The Architecture of Grounds, Romberg and Boyd, 1927–1971*, 298.



their suggestions of both Colonial Australia and the Orient.’<sup>74</sup> One year after the house was completed, however, the Philips claimed to be opposed to any sense of historical style, stating that ‘because of its simple form, the house would avoid any suggestion of architectural stylism, and would remain timeless in this age in which most houses are classified by “periods”’.<sup>75</sup> The key to their satisfaction with the house in relation to the question of style would appear to be the word ‘suggestion’—indicating the existence of inscrutable visual references to the past that are implicit rather than explicit.



**Figure 4.6 Frances Philip, Painting: Philip House from north, 1988**

Image: Candida Griffiths Collection

<sup>74</sup> John Philip to Grounds, 4 December 1959, ‘Philip House Canberra Correspondence’.

<sup>75</sup> ‘Style is Timeless’, [Author not noted, but possibly Eric Wilson], *Australian Home Beautiful* (December 1963): 10.

The Philip House became an embodiment of one of Grounds' major strengths as a house designer: his ability to skilfully fuse historical and modernist elements into an integrated whole. By juxtaposing the familiar with the unfamiliar in a way that was essentially new, Grounds—and his co-designer, Boyd—created a modern and original house that incorporated subtle traces of architectural precedents within the massing, proportion and detail of its fabric.

Boyd described how this worked in an analysis of earlier houses by Grounds:

[T]he materials looked new because they were put together in a new way. They looked squarer and lighter and there were fewer lines, ridges and pockets...they were ordered into more precise shapes and they seemed to cohere better, making a simple but vigorous little pattern of every house.<sup>76</sup>

But it was in this refinement process that the correct balance between traditional techniques and the modern aesthetic was sometimes lost. The reductive approach that Grounds and Boyd both applied to architectural massing—where they took a form and pared it down to its simplest and most elemental state—had its drawbacks when it came to detailing. Of particular concern was Boyd's preference for concealing roof gutters, as demonstrated by the Fenner House. The Vasey Crescent Group houses did not fare much better, with the box gutters becoming blocked with leaves, resulting in water penetration into the interiors during heavy downpours.<sup>77</sup>

After it was completed in early 1962, the Philip House attracted a lot of interest from the public. This was something that it shared with the Fenner and Zwar houses—but with one major difference. The attention was now due to the fact that there was not just one modern house that stood out, but three in a row. Griffiths remembered seeing many cars slowing outside the house, and the drivers and passengers stopping to look. She imagined that many of them were shocked by the 'three ugly houses' set back so far from the street, made out of besser block, with their large windows and flat roofs.<sup>78</sup>

It was the fact that this was a group of modern houses that polarised opinion about the Vasey Crescent Group. Writers such as Eric Wilson and Morton Herman were enthusiastic in their appraisal. Wilson wrote that the group was

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76 Robin Boyd, *Australia's Home: Its Origins, Builders and Occupiers* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1952), 175.

77 While there is no evidence of problems with the Philip House in this regard, the other two both leaked. 'Vasey Residences. Saw Bruce Griffing Sunday after a very heavy downpour, and both his and Blaker's houses leaked badly. Water seemed to fill gutters and run back up under roofing and distribute itself over ceiling boards leaking through at every crack. Large amounts at windows running down inside face of walls.' Lou Gerhardt (Grounds, Romberg and Boyd representative in Canberra) to Boyd, 26 October 1962, 'Philip House Canberra Correspondence'.

78 Candida Griffiths, Interview by the author, 27 June 2008.

an excellent example of an alternative to the ‘anarchy’ of ‘uncontrolled design and speculative building’ that was taking over new suburbs. Most houses in Canberra, he believed, were ‘a chaotic mixture of the conventionally dull and stridently gimmicky’—houses that were similar to those found in other cities, but ‘out of character with the generally conservative architecture of Canberra’. The Vasey Crescent houses, however, provided ‘harmony with the landscape and with each other’, were appropriate for the dignity of the national capital, and demonstrated many of Walter Burley Griffin’s ideals in regard to the planning of private houses.<sup>79</sup> Herman wrote how the three houses were vastly different in design, but were given ‘harmony of appearance’ through similar materials. Because the contours of the sites were largely unchanged, the houses displayed a ‘very natural relationship between buildings and ground’.<sup>80</sup>

But the strengths of the Vasey Crescent Group, viewed through the eyes of their critics, were also their main weakness. Traditionalists, opposed to modern design, thought that these houses signalled too great a departure from what they were used to: brick-walled bungalows with tiled, hipped roofs—the sort of houses that had established a foothold in the capital city back in the 1930s. The key to their disenchantment was the underlying threat implied by the uniformity of the houses—as Wilson described it, ‘the hint of regimentation’ that they detected in the unified designs. Critics saw this as a dangerous precedent, a potential imposition on freedom of choice, and asked: ‘who would want to live in a city of homes all designed by Grounds, Romberg and Boyd, or Griffin, or any other architect for that matter?’<sup>81</sup> There was, of course, no possibility that such an event would ever have occurred, and a city of uniform house design was never the intention of Grounds, Romberg and Boyd—or of Griffin. Rather, the Vasey Crescent Group was a unique opportunity for an experiment in the coordination of three adjacent houses. It was an opportunity that Grounds, Boyd and all three clients fully exploited.

In a cheeky note to John Philip that Grounds left under the front door of the Philip House when he passed through Canberra, he wrote: ‘Betty and I are in Canberra just for today, so I brought her upstairs here to see as much as I felt I could walk into of what I believe to be the loveliest example of architecture in Canberra.’<sup>82</sup> Boyd believed, however, that the real significance of the Vasey Crescent Group was not as a series of individual houses, but as a group. In August 1962, after a period of friction between the partners—generated by Grounds’ decision to break away from the firm and carry out the National Gallery of Victoria project on his own—the firm of Grounds, Romberg and Boyd

79 Wilson, ‘Good-Mannered Houses’, 5–6.

80 Morton Herman, ‘Is YOUR House in the Upper Ten?’, *The Australian* (3 August 1964): 10.

81 Wilson, ‘Good-Mannered Houses’, 6.

82 Grounds to John Philip, Undated, Papers of John Philip.

was liquidated, and the new firm of Romberg and Boyd was founded. During the following month, Grounds, following requests from the Philips and the Blakers, entered the Vasey Crescent Group into the Royal Australian Institute of Architects single-family residence award. Boyd did not agree with this decision, writing:

I think it is a pity that these houses were entered in the competition. I don't think that they are likely to win. I am proud of them as a group and I think they prove something—as a group. But individually nobody has ever pretended that they are very remarkable houses, and the competition is for individual houses.<sup>83</sup>

The response from Grounds, via Lou Gerhardt, was ambivalent: 'We can cancel out now if either firm wishes...Mr. Grounds said that he has no feelings pro or con, and would leave it to you.' He did add, however, that the clients could have entered on their own behalf if he had refused.<sup>84</sup> Against Boyd's wishes, the entry was not withdrawn, and the houses failed to receive an award.

Essentially, Boyd was correct. The ultimate significance of the Philip House resides in the contribution it makes to the Vasey Crescent Group. While it is difficult to talk of the significance of the Philip House as a separate entity, some issues stand out above others. There was an extraordinary amount of correspondence between the clients and the architects throughout the design and documentation phases. Considerable thought was given to every detail and to every decision that was made. In this regard, the Philips deserve credit for their energy and enthusiasm, and the architects for their patience in dealing with clients who were so intimately involved. John Philip's enthusiasm for architecture and boundless energy for what became his pet project, coupled with his application of scientific theory and complete inability to accept refusal for his ideas, were major contributions.

John Philip's passion for architecture continued to the end of his life. In July 1999, he was tragically run over and killed by a car after stepping off a tram in Amsterdam. Candida Griffiths recalled—with some trepidation—how her father was most probably on his way to visit an exhibition of Frank Lloyd Wright's work at the time.<sup>85</sup>

The final house design reflected many of John Philip's aspirations and ideals—particularly in regard to passive solar design. The emphasis he gave, however, to this aspect over and above all other criteria created problems in regard to the

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83 Boyd to Lou Gerhardt, 24 September 1962, 'Philip House Canberra Correspondence'.

84 Grounds (per Gerhardt) to Romberg and Boyd, 28 September 1962, 'Philip House Canberra Correspondence'.

85 Candida Griffiths, Interview by the author, 27 June 2008.

way the house was used. The decision to place the kitchen and living spaces on the upper level meant that it was necessary to carry grocery items up two full flights of stairs from the basement car space, and it physically detached the living spaces from the garden. In regard to the former issue, early drawings indicated that a dumb waiter was to be installed between the basement and kitchen, but this was later deleted to save cost. The Philips did not regret this decision, as they viewed negotiation of the stairs as part of their daily exercise regime.<sup>86</sup> The physical separation of the living spaces from the outside, however, remained a significant shortcoming that was alleviated, to some extent, by the provision of a small balcony. Shared by bedroom one, this overlooked the nature reserve to the south.

Finally, the architectural character of the Philip House represents the idea that it is valid for a new architectural paradigm to incorporate ideas and concepts from the previous version. In this way, the house became a conceptual bridge spanning the incommensurability between the 'old' and the 'new' paradigms. Unlike Seidler, Grounds and Boyd saw no need to discard previous ways of designing and building houses in the search for a radical new solution. In the Philip House, they endeavoured to construct a house that was a genuine amalgam of the best of both worlds: a delicate balance between known and established techniques and contemporary approaches.

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.





**Figure 4.7 Frances Philip, Painting: Philip House and children, 1965.  
Left to right: Peregrine, Candida and Julian**

Image: Candida Griffiths Collection