

## 5. Where Science Meets Art: Bischoff and the Gascoigne House

Theo said, ‘What a great house it is...but it takes two people to build a house: an architect and a client—and you have been very good clients.’ And I was pleased to hear that.

— Ben Gascoigne<sup>1</sup>



**Figure 5.1 Gascoigne House, view from north**

Photograph: Bill Lyristakis, 2010

Sidney (‘Ben’) Gascoigne chuckled and leaned across the dining table, placing his hand near a small groove on one edge of its otherwise pristine surface.

Do you see that saw-cut there? Rosalie made that! She used to put bits of wood on the table and saw them, you see. And when I came home one day and she showed it to me, I said, ‘Well, we’re not going to fill that, not for anybody—this was made by Rosalie Gascoigne!’

It was late November 2007, and I was interviewing Ben in the dining room at 3 Anstey Street, Pearce—a house that Theo Bischoff designed for the Gascoignes

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<sup>1</sup> Ben Gascoigne, Interview by the author, 26 November 2007.

in 1967 and 1968. This was the last week that Ben was to spend in the house. Rosalie, his wife of 56 years and one of Australia's most highly regarded artists, had died eight years previously, and he was about to move into a smaller property. Many of her artworks had been prepared on the table around which we were sitting. Now they were going to new homes: to Ben's apartment, to the National Gallery of Australia or to other family members' houses.<sup>2</sup>

But the courtyard of the house, where Rosalie stored the raw materials for her assemblages, was still cluttered with ephemera that she had accumulated over 30 years of fossicking: dozens of old porcelain dolls' heads, stacks of sun-bleached animal vertebrae, piles of weathered timber slabs from old soft-drink crates, worn enamelware bowls and teapots, fragments of road signs, rusted iron, metal fans, bicycle seats, wire grilles and assorted kitchenalia.

Ben and Rosalie were both born in New Zealand, and emigrated to Australia during World War II when Ben took up a position at the Commonwealth Solar Observatory on Mount Stromlo. During the war, Ben worked on optical munitions: one of his first projects was designing a sighting telescope for anti-aircraft guns.<sup>3</sup> In the postwar years, he began observing stars in the Magellanic clouds, two small galaxies 170 000 light years away. He explored the photometry of faint stars and the maximum effectiveness of telescopes, and was instrumental in setting up the Anglo-Australian Telescope at Siding Spring.<sup>4</sup> Ben's observations and research contributed to the understanding of galactic distance and evolutionary theory. A Fellow of the Australian Academy of Science, he was the first Australian to be elected as Associate Member of the Royal Astronomical Society.<sup>5</sup>

The Anstey Street house (hereinafter referred to as 'the Gascoigne House') was the third of three houses in the Australian Capital Territory that the family lived in. The first was Residence 19, a staff house on Mount Stromlo, where they lived between 1943 and 1960, while the second was a house in Deakin, owned by The Australian National University, which they leased from 1960 to 1969.

Ben and Rosalie both contributed to the house. Ben's brief to Bischoff was the most comprehensive and detailed of any client in this book, and was based on an analysis and critique of problems that the family had experienced with their

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2 Ben Gascoigne passed away in 2010.

3 Vici MacDonald, *Rosalie Gascoigne* (Paddington, NSW: Regaro, 1998), 13; Tom Frame and Don Faulkner, *Stromlo: An Australian Observatory* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2003), 81.

4 'Some Recent Advances in the Optics of Large Telescopes', *ANU News* 1 (October 1964): 12; *Quarterly Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society* (1968): 9, 98–115; Stephen Foster and Margaret Varghese, *The Making of The Australian National University 1946–96* (St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1996), 98–9.

5 Ragbir Bhathal, *Australian Astronomers: Achievements at the Frontiers of Astronomy* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1996), 48.

first two houses. Rosalie added to Ben's criticisms of the previous houses, and became more involved with the project when she could see that it was becoming a reality.

In comparison with his distinguished clients—and with the other architects featured in this book—Bischoff remains a little-known architect outside Canberra. Many of his houses were published in *The Canberra Times*, *The Australian* and other publications in the 1960s soon after they were completed, and a few were included in J. R. Conner's *A Guide to Canberra Buildings* of 1970, but very little has been published on his work during the intervening decades.<sup>6</sup> His well-crafted, modernist houses, however, have stood the dual tests of time and of changing architectural fashion, and are today held in high regard by those in Canberra who are aware of his work. Most of his houses have been retained—many preserved in near-original condition—while others have been restored or extended.<sup>7</sup> When the Marshall House at 86 Morgan Crescent, Curtin—originally designed by Bischoff for the ANU microbiologist Ian Marshall and his wife, Kathleen—was advertised for sale in 2007, the real estate agent attempted to explain the reasons for its enduring appeal: 'Theo Bischoff's timeless architecture is as relevant today as it was when he designed the single level residence almost forty years ago. Extensive timber joinery and the simple detailing of natural material and finishes are evident throughout... and are so evocative of the sixties.'<sup>8</sup>

6 J. R. Conner, *A Guide to Canberra Buildings* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1970). No work by Bischoff appears on the Royal Australian Institute of Architects' *Register of Significant Twentieth Century Architecture*, or on the institute's *Map of Significant Canberra Architecture*. Bischoff's work is not included in Andrew Metcalf's *Canberra Architecture* (Sydney: Watermark Press, 2003), and he is mentioned on Martin Miles' *Canberra House: Mid-Century Modernist Architecture* web site only as being project architect for the Frankel House in Campbell and a partner in the firm Scollay, Bischoff and Pegrum. Martin Miles, *Canberra House: Mid-Century Modernist Architecture* (Canberra: Martin Miles and Canberra House), <<http://www.canberrahouse.com>>

7 Toss and Lyn Gascoigne live in a house at 56 Vasey Crescent, Campbell, designed by Bischoff in 1964 for medical practitioner Dr Aubrey Tow. This house is in original condition. Other Bischoff houses include the Clarke House at 212 Dryandra Street, O'Connor (1958); the Bischoff House at 47 Carstenz Street, Griffith (1959); the Watson House at 13 Waller Crescent, Campbell (1961); the Cleland House at 33 Godfrey Street, Campbell (1961); the Benson House at 61 Quiros Street, Red Hill (1962); the Homer House at 25 Chermiside Street, Deakin (1963); the Dr Andrea House at 32 Holmes Crescent, Campbell (1965); the Kellow House at 11 Rason Place, Curtin (1965); the Dr Horniblow House at 15 Theodore Street, Curtin (1965); the Marshall House at 86 Morgan Crescent, Curtin (1966); and the Pike House at 2 Garsia Street, Campbell (1966). Some of these—including the Andrea, Marshall and Pike houses—have had sympathetic additions or alterations.

8 Raine and Horne advertisement, agent Mary Debus, [Domain section], *The Canberra Times* (18 August 2007).

## Residence 19, Commonwealth Solar Observatory

In 1905, in the midst of post-Federation debate over where to locate Australia's new federal city, Australian astronomer Geoffrey Duffield approached the Australian Government with a proposal. But, unlike many others who were lobbying the Government at that time, his proposition had nothing to do with the location of the capital city. Instead, Duffield wanted the Government to establish a solar observatory, the function of which would be to provide an Australian connection in a global network. He believed that an Australian observatory would fill a gap in the system between existing observatories in the British colony of India and the United States.<sup>9</sup>

Like many architects and planners of his time, Duffield was interested in the sun from a climatic point of view.<sup>10</sup> New instruments allowing observation of the sun's atmosphere had revealed luminous clouds that were larger than sunspots. Believing that there might be a connection between sunspots, magnetic fields and rainfall, he hoped that the study of solar phenomena might provide a greater understanding of terrestrial meteorological conditions and assist with weather forecasting and anticipation of drought.<sup>11</sup>

In 1908 the Australian Government decided to locate the Federal Capital Territory in the Yass–Canberra region, and in the following year confirmed that an observatory would be located within the Territory. Duffield's environmental criteria for the observatory included large numbers of sunny days, low average rainfall, low wind velocity, steady barometer readings, clearness of atmosphere, good elevation, and the presence of vegetation and foliage to prevent excessive radiation. A number of elevated sites within the capital Territory were considered, and Mount Stromlo—the highest peak in a 1.5 km-long ridge, situated 11 km to the west of the proposed federal city and approximately 200 m above its general level—was selected.<sup>12</sup> Plans for a full-scale observatory were put on hold during World War I, however, when the principal activity on Mount Stromlo

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9 Solar Physics Committee of the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science, *Memorandum upon the Proposed Solar Observatory in Australia* (Adelaide, 1909), 6.

10 English planner and theorist Charles Reade (writing as 'Ebenezer Howard') endorsed the importance of the sun in relation to urban planning by identifying sunlight as an essential element of his 'Garden City' concept. Reade's Garden City ideal, with its explicit debt to scientific thought, was an important influence on later planners and architects of the federal capital such as John Sulman and John Murdoch. Ebenezer Howard, *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* (London: Faber, 1946), originally published as *Tomorrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* (1898). In 1908, English-trained architect Robert Haddon's *Australian Architecture* attempted to address the Australian climate and sun. Robert Haddon, *Australian Architecture: A Technical Manual for all Those Engaged in Architectural and Building Work* (Melbourne: E. W. Cole, 1908).

11 Frame and Faulkner, *Stromlo: An Australian Observatory*, 16.

12 Surveyor Charles Scrivener met the government astronomers of New South Wales and Victoria, plus the Commonwealth Meteorologist, in the Federal Capital Territory on 1 March 1910. They inspected potential

consisted of the planting of a *Pinus radiata* ('Monterey pine') plantation by the horticulturalist Charles Weston. This forest, which was ostensibly introduced to get rid of rabbits, stabilise the soil and improve atmospheric conditions in accordance with Duffield's guidelines, spread over the mountain in the ensuing decades and eventually reached the ridgeline.<sup>13</sup>

When the Government finally committed to the establishment of a full-scale observatory in 1923, attention was focused on the layout of the complex, including the location of staff houses. The Commonwealth Meteorologist believed that 'the crest of the Mount Stromlo ridge' was 'an ideal site for a scientific community', but was concerned about the location of staff accommodation: 'The exclusion of the dwellings, which would be situated on the slopes without the compound, is also important as difficulties are always liable to arise from purely personal reasons, particularly where the families of married officials are concerned.' He added that 'the roofs of dwelling houses should not rise above the level of the crest of the hill, and the houses themselves should be situated preferably on the south-eastern slopes'.<sup>14</sup> In July 1923, Duffield, Henry Rolland (Works Director to the Federal Capital Advisory Committee) and Colonel Percy Owen (Director-General of the Department of Works and Railways) met on site to discuss the siting of the observatory buildings. Afterwards they confirmed that the staff housing would be located on the eastern side of Stromlo ridge to provide shelter from the prevailing winds.<sup>15</sup>

It was determined that houses would be required for the Director, two assistants and possibly one senior mechanic, while single accommodation would be needed for research fellows, clerks, a professional officer, apprentice, janitor, chauffeur and cook.<sup>16</sup> During the 1920s the Federal Capital Commission's Architect's Department, under Rolland, designed and built a community of eight staff residences on Mount Stromlo. Termed 'cottages' in the English tradition by the commission, these were similar to the standard houses provided for civil servants in Canberra at the time. Constructed of double brickwork, stuccoed on the exterior and smooth-plastered inside, they had low-pitched, tiled roofs and timber-framed doors and windows. Their simple forms rejected elaborate ornamentation, but contained passing references to Mediterranean and Georgian styles.

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observatory sites at Black Mountain, Mount Mugga, Mount Ainslie, the Cotter–Murrumbidgee River junction and Mount Stromlo. Of these, some were considered too small, while there were concerns that Black Mountain would be affected by the glare from city lights. Ibid., 23–5.

13 Ibid., 29–30.

14 Ibid., 31.

15 Henry Rolland, Interview by Donald Brech, 29, 32; and *ibid.*, 32.

16 Commonwealth Department of Works and Railways, 'Commonwealth Observatory Mount Stromlo Erection—Notes on Projected Commonwealth Observatory, Stromlo, Federal Territory', 19 February 1923, National Archives of Australia, NAA Series A199, Item FC 1926/206.



The Mount Stromlo cottages followed contemporary planning principles, including accommodation of families without servants, and more efficient, less formal planning. They also incorporated new technology such as plumbing, sanitation and electricity. For these reasons they would have been considered up-to-date at the time they were built.<sup>17</sup> They were not, however, particularly well equipped to deal with the extreme climates on the exposed slopes of Mount Stromlo.



**Figure 5.2 'Residence 19', Mount Stromlo Observatory, 1926. This would become the Gascoignes' first house**

Photograph: National Archives of Australia, NAA: A3560, 1820

Ben Gascoigne arrived at the Commonwealth Solar Observatory in August 1941, and moved into the Bachelors' Quarters. Rosalie, who had met her future husband in Auckland in 1933, remained in New Zealand for the time being. Arriving in Sydney by flying boat in January 1943, Rosalie transferred to Canberra and travelled on to Mount Stromlo.<sup>18</sup> Ben and Rosalie married in early 1943 and moved into one of the staff cottages, known as Residence 19.

Rosalie's first impression of her new environment was the intense colour: 'Green, orange and blues. It was terribly coloured.' And the fact that 'the sun came out like a hammer. As soon as you stepped out the door—bang!'<sup>19</sup> But by winter of her first year on the mountain, she was convinced that the house had been designed with little appreciation of local conditions: 'that big open cold "built

17 For a description of the Federal Capital Commission houses, see Ruth Daniell, 'Imported Styles: Some Origins of Federal Capital Architecture', in Peter Freeman, ed., *The Early Canberra House: Living in Canberra 1911–1933* (Canberra: The Federal Capital Press of Australia, 1996), 91–106.

18 Martin Gascoigne, *New Zealand Lives: The New Zealand Families of Rosalie Gascoigne and Ben Gascoigne* (Canberra: Private publication, 2005), 316.

19 MacDonald, *Rosalie Gascoigne*, 13.

on the south side of the hill” house that we had...It was cold. And the air hung purple like that, purple in the passages.’ She recalled that on some days it was warmer outside the house than it was inside. When inside, she found it was too cold to go down the passage to get a handkerchief, and preferred to huddle around the fuel fire in the kitchen.

But Rosalie found ways to pass the time indoors. In an indication of what was to come, during ‘one drab winter’, she began constructing a patchwork quilt:

While the wind howled among the pines and hurled itself against the side of the house and my husband went up to work I used to sit patching flowery hexagons together, and the colour and the cheerfulness of the materials never failed to bring company into the room for me.

The darkness of the winter months in the Mount Stromlo house had other repercussions. The Gascoignes began buying modern art prints from Ben’s friend Carl Plate, an abstract artist who ran the Notanda Gallery in Rowe Street, Sydney. But the lack of natural light inside the house became a problem: one of the prints, a Braque in a green frame, ‘was too dark for their gloomy house’. Rosalie began to dread the arrival of winter, when ‘all colour vanished from the garden and the hill was bitter with meager grass and stones’. Finding the colours of the landscape barren, she would search desperately ‘for any kind of visual excitement’.<sup>20</sup>

The problems inside the house were aggravated by Weston’s pine forest and by the way in which the house was sited. Although the trees had been cleared in patches to accommodate clusters of observatory buildings, they still obscured views to the south. Because the house was located on the south-eastern slope of the mountain and was cut into a bank on the north side, it was in shade for most of the day. For an astronomer who was able to see further than anyone else into the night sky through a telescope, it was frustrating for Ben to return to his own house, further down the mountain, and find that the potentially wonderful views over the Molonglo Valley were obscured by a wall of pine trees.<sup>21</sup> Rosalie remembered the oppressive denseness of the plantation, how the ‘pine clad mountain closed in on her as she drove back up from town’. It was a memory that stayed with her: when she eventually moved down from the mountain to live in the suburbs of Canberra below, she gave a radio talk for

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20 Ibid., 13–16; Rosalie Gascoigne, Interview by Robin Hughes, Australian Biography Project, 12 November 1998, <<http://www.australianbiography.gov.au/subjects/gascoigne/interview>>

21 Gascoigne recalled that ‘[we] didn’t get any view...we couldn’t see through these pine trees’. Ben Gascoigne, Interview by the author, 26 November 2007.

the Australian Broadcasting Corporation about her Mount Stromlo experiences. Titled 'Too Many Pine Trees', it contained numerous references to her memories of the dark and gloomy forest.<sup>22</sup>

Ben recalled how the pine trees—until they were decimated (for the first time) by fire in 1952—shaded their house from what little sun was available: 'we didn't get the winter sun until ten or eleven in the morning, not properly, and there'd be a frost on the southern side of the house—frost there all day sometimes.' To combat the cold, Residence 19 was equipped with no less than five separate fireplaces, a wood stove and a copper for heating water. At a later stage, Ben arranged for oil-fired heating to be added.<sup>23</sup> While the house was virtually sunless, Ben found another problem: any heat that was generated inside quickly dissipated through the external fabric. Following advice from The Australian National University—which had taken over administration of the observatory from the Department of the Interior in 1957<sup>24</sup>—Ben arranged for ceiling insulation to be installed at his own expense. This amounted to £91.4.2—a significant amount at the time. Two years later, when they moved to the Canberra suburb of Deakin, he wrote to the university asking if they would purchase the insulation back from him, stating that 'ceiling insulation can now be regarded as standard practice in Canberra'.<sup>25</sup>

More than 40 years later, the same pine forest played another, more deadly role, providing fuel for a massive firestorm that gutted most of the buildings on Mount Stromlo—including Residence 19 and the Director's Residence—and devastated Canberra's western suburbs.

## 'A Feeling of Space and Air'<sup>26</sup>

Rosalie's contribution to the Gascoigne House is best approached through an analysis of the ways in which space was important to her work. Descriptions of her art and influences contain many references to space, as do the artist's own accounts. These can be divided into two principal types of space: the external environment that Rosalie explored on foot—and later by car—and the internal

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22 MacDonald, *Rosalie Gascoigne*, 14–15.

23 Ben Gascoigne, Interview by the author, 26 November 2007.

24 In 1957 Mount Stromlo was formally transferred from the Commonwealth Department of the Interior to The Australian National University and renamed the Department of Astronomy in the Research School of Physical Sciences. Foster and Varghese, *The Making of The Australian National University 1946–96*, 99; Frame and Faulkner, *Stromlo: An Australian Observatory*, 131.

25 Ben Gascoigne to Registrar, ANU, 12 July 1960, Papers of Ben Gascoigne (1938–2007), Manuscript Collection, National Library of Australia, MS Acc08/33, Box 4 (House).

26 Edmond Capon, 'Preface', in Deborah Edwards, *Rosalie Gascoigne: Material as Landscape* (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1998), 5.



spaces of her houses and studio.<sup>27</sup> An appreciation of how each of these spatial typologies impacted on Rosalie's creative process is critical to an understanding of her art—and, consequently, to an appreciation of the role that her domestic environment played in that work.

Rosalie spent a lot of time exploring Mount Stromlo and the wider area of the Monaro region, becoming intimate with these environments and collecting raw materials and found objects. Many writers commented on how something of the essence of these spaces was captured in her assemblages of objects. Edmund Capon wrote about how her art was 'inspired by the surroundings of her immediate landscape, the spacious grazing lands of the Monaro region near Canberra. Reflecting that inspiration, a feeling of space and air echoes eloquently through her work.'<sup>28</sup> Kelly Gellatly described how one of Rosalie's largest works, *Monaro*, a sprawling 4.6 x 1.3 m composition of fragments from yellow soft-drink containers, 'seems to hold the effect of wind rippling across sun-drenched grasslands at its very surface'.<sup>29</sup>

It was the apparent barrenness of the unfamiliar Mount Stromlo environment that trained Rosalie's perception: 'Through that sort of poverty with things, your eye gets very sharp.' In the beginning, Rosalie was observing out of pure necessity—a desperate attempt to fill a visual void: 'I had to have things that I found interesting. There wasn't any stimulation of the eye. You fed your eye as much as you could.' Studying her new landscape in detail, she learnt to identify 'every sort of gravel on that mountain, every sort of grass'.<sup>30</sup> When she found time between domestic duties, Rosalie created a flower garden on the steep land behind the house. Closely related to Rosalie's observation of her surroundings was the desire to pick up objects that interested her and take them home: 'I used to go out, which I liked doing, and I'd take anything that was beautiful...I'd gather that home.'<sup>31</sup> She began collecting Australian native plants, and learnt how to preserve flowers and grass. Gathering roadside grass in spring, she would tie it in bundles and hang them in the garage. An indication of how serious Rosalie was becoming about her interests, and how keen she was to acquire technical information, was her 1960 paper on plant properties, drying methods and the impact of seasonal changes.<sup>32</sup>

27 The Gascoignes bought their first car 'from the people across the way' in 'about 1948'. MacDonald, *Rosalie Gascoigne*, 16.

28 Capon, 'Preface', 5.

29 Kelly Gellatly, 'Rosalie Gascoigne: Making Poetry of the Commonplace', in Kelly Gellatly, *Rosalie Gascoigne* (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 2008), 20.

30 MacDonald, *Rosalie Gascoigne*, 15–16.

31 Rosalie Gascoigne, Interview by Robin Hughes, 12 November 1998.

32 MacDonald, *Rosalie Gascoigne*, 17.



**Figure 5.3** Rosalie Gascoigne, *Loose Leaf*, 1991. Sawn 'Schweppes' soft drink crates

Image: Rosalie Gascoigne Archives

Other items that she hoarded during the Stromlo period included skulls, bones and rocks. But Rosalie was not the only one: on family outings her children—Martin, Thomas ('Toss') and Hester—also started to collect found objects. Martin recalled how bringing 'a good stone or a nicely shaped piece of wood' home was the way to his mother's heart, and how he and his siblings became quite good at it.<sup>33</sup> All of the items that were brought home were carefully placed in various locations around the house:

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 18.

It was just something to have on the mantelpiece. I needed things to look at, you see...So if I put an old kerosene tin lid on because I thought it was a lovely orange or something, and put it there, well that was something for me to look at. See, it's sort of need of the pleasures of the eye. I needed it badly.<sup>34</sup>

This is where the importance of that other type of space—the private, enclosed spaces of her house—becomes apparent. Intimate spaces inside and underneath the Mount Stromlo house provided Rosalie with an opportunity to remove the found objects from their original setting, to introduce them to her own context, and to contemplate them over time. But nothing happened immediately: 'It was very gradual. I had to bring things into my house to look at.' Any available horizontal surface became a potential display space:

As vision grows I see more, I bring back materials from the landscape and place them around. Little things on ledges, or laid out on the floor or in the garden. They are then available to be looked at in my space. As things are moved about, there are more discoveries, more is revealed.<sup>35</sup>

The domestic spaces where Rosalie studied her findings became 'intensely private' places, inner sanctums where she attempted to create order out of chaos. In there she would rearrange objects until she reached a point where they recalled 'the feeling of an actual moment in the landscape'.<sup>36</sup> Rosalie became involved with flower arranging. From September 1955 she entered her displays in the annual Canberra Horticultural Society shows—often held in the Albert Hall on Commonwealth Avenue—or at events organised by the Country Women's Association. At these, she had significant success—regularly winning prizes right through until the mid-1960s—and developed a reputation for her arrangements in the Canberra region.<sup>37</sup>

While living on Mount Stromlo, the Gascoignes became friendly with Jack Deeble, Executive Secretary of the Academy of Science, and his family, who were there from 1956 to 1958. One day in 1959 Deeble phoned Rosalie and asked her if she would like to prepare some of her art arrangements for a major conference that was to be held in the Academy building. Rosalie was delighted, and accepted the challenge. She prepared arrangements for the main entrance foyer, the stair halls and the Fellows' room. The experiment was so successful that in 1960 Rosalie was formally commissioned to provide art installations for the main public areas of the Academy building, an arrangement that continued

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34 Rosalie Gascoigne, Interview by Robin Hughes, 12 November 1998.

35 Rosalie Gascoigne, in Edwards, *Rosalie Gascoigne: Material as Landscape*, 8.

36 Edwards, *Rosalie Gascoigne: Material as Landscape*, 8.

37 Ian North, 'Signs of Light', in *Australia Venice Biennale 1982: Works by Peter Booth and Rosalie Gascoigne* (Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council, 1982), 48–9.

through until 1964. From Rosalie's point of view, the most significant aspect of this commission was that it provided her with an opportunity to work on a much larger scale than what she was able to achieve within her home environment.

In 1960 the Gascoignes left Residence 19 on Mount Stromlo and moved to a much smaller house, owned by The Australian National University, at 22 Dugan Street, Deakin. While this leafy suburb is now considered to be established and central, when they moved there the house was one of the first in the area, and was still surrounded by farmland. Rosalie described the house as 'very badly designed', a 'terrible house' with 'no room in it'.<sup>38</sup> But the surrounding paddocks and slopes of Red Hill became her new domain—and an abundant source of found objects for an artist whose eyes were becoming 'attuned to the landscape'.

In 1962 Rosalie began attending formal lessons in ikebana under Norman Sparnon, Director of the Australian branch of the modern Sogetsu School. Considered to be a fine art in Japan, Sogetsu was considered sculpture rather than decoration.<sup>39</sup> While Sparnon's ikebana classes helped to develop her compositional eye, Rosalie eventually found them to be too restrictive. Ceasing to attend in 1972, she progressed to pure sculpture.

But the confined spaces of the Deakin house were a limitation. The only place where she could accumulate material was the garden: 'But when I wanted to do something, there was nowhere to do it in the house. There was one sitting room, lots of passageways. Two bathrooms. A lot of passage...[but] there was nowhere to settle in the house.' At this point, Rosalie became convinced that she and Ben would have to build their own house.<sup>40</sup>

When it came to finding an architect, the Gascoignes did their research. Rosalie knocked on the door of houses that she liked, asking the owners who had designed them. They were attracted to Ken Woolley's Pettit and Sevitt Houses, which, by the late 1960s, were appearing around Canberra suburbs. They visited the Lovering House—just around the corner in Beauchamp Street, Deakin—that Woolley had designed for the ANU geologist John Lovering and his wife, Kerry, and inspected Noel Potter's Birch House.<sup>41</sup> But it was when Louisa Pike invited the Gascoignes to see their Bischoff-designed house at 3 Garsia Street, Campbell, that they really took notice. For clients who were concerned with views, and who valued natural light, the Pike House was a revelation. Bischoff had designed it as a series of cellular, rectangular spaces separated by a 'star

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38 Rosalie Gascoigne, Interview by Robin Hughes, 12 November 1998.

39 The Sogetsu School was created in 1926 by Sofu Teshigahara. Kasumi Teshigahara, *The Sogetsu Text on Moribana* (Tokyo, 1969).

40 'You can't have what you want unless you build it yourself'. Rosalie Gascoigne, Interview by Robin Hughes.

41 Hester Gascoigne, In discussion with the author, 26 July 2009, Canberra.

pattern' of variously proportioned open courtyards that flooded the adjacent spaces with natural light. Spread round a square, central court that contained a fountain, there were five courtyards in total.

Further aspects of the Pike House that the Gascoignes liked were the wide circulation gallery surrounding the central court and the sensible solar orientation. Ben remembered how the house 'took advantage of the site...the sun came around on the right side', and 'it had a certain eastern aspect to catch the early morning sun, which in Canberra's important because the winters, of course, can be mighty cold'. After their experience with the Mount Stromlo house, he was determined that they would have a house with a northern, or north-eastern, aspect.<sup>42</sup> Some time later, Ben and Rosalie noticed an article in *The Canberra Times* about the Pike House, which they cut out and saved for future reference. Ben, no doubt, was intrigued by the optical theme of Ann Whitelaw's article: 'Courtyard and Fountain Provides Bright Focal Point.'<sup>43</sup>

Whether Ben was also aware that Bischoff had generated his plan from a 'star pattern' of courtyards is not clear; but there was already enough evidence to convince the Gascoignes that they had found the right architect, and Bischoff was engaged to design their new house.

## An Informed Brief

After all, houses are important: it's where you live, and it's worth giving serious thought to.

— Ben Gascoigne<sup>44</sup>

The one activity that underscored and informed all aspects of the Gascoignes' involvement with their house was observation. In terms of relative dimension between observer and object, Ben and Rosalie—as astronomer and artist—approached this from opposite poles. But despite these extremes of focal length, it was the act of observation in its broadest dimension—of studying physical objects in three-dimensional space—that united the Gascoignes in their approach to their surroundings, and in their perception of domestic space. That the fundamental purpose of observation, for Ben, was to find an essential truth, or quality, in the physical environment was a truism. Yet the same objective also

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42 Ben Gascoigne, Interview by the author, 26 November 2007.

43 Ann Whitelaw, 'Courtyard and Fountain Provides Bright Focal Point', *The Canberra Times* (4 June 1968): 12, clipping held in Papers of Ben Gascoigne, 1938–2007, Box 4 (House).

44 Ben Gascoigne, Interview by the author, 26 November 2007.



applied to Rosalie, for whom 'the bottom line in art' was honesty—a quest for 'eternal truths in nature, the rhythms, cycles, seasons, shapes, regeneration, restorative powers, spirit'.<sup>45</sup>

Ben and Rosalie had strong ideas about what kind of house they wanted. In accordance with their contrasting approaches—as Martin observed, 'their personalities were famously [unlike]'—these ideas came from widely differing perspectives.<sup>46</sup> Ben's approach, naturally, was rational and scientific, based on an analysis of known facts, the establishment of problems and the formulation of specific responses in the form of design criteria. These were requirements that, to a competent architect, could be clearly understood—and even quantifiable in the completed building. Rosalie's approach, in contrast, was more instinctive and intuitive: a combination of gut instinct and practicality, expressed in the form of poetic aphorisms. Rosalie's instructions to Bischoff were informed by her experience of working within the larger volumes of the Academy building: 'don't shut us in...I need space...lots of air: high ceilings and wide windows to allow the elements in and frame views of the distant hills.'<sup>47</sup>

All of the problems that the Gascoignes had experienced with Residence 19 were filed away in Ben's memory. From there they resurfaced as the generating force behind his brief to Bischoff. Added to that was his analysis of other houses for sale in the Australian Capital Territory. Ben was appalled by their neglect of aspect: 'They all faced the same way—they all faced out onto the road and they had little verandahs or porches, so you could sit out there. [But] nobody ever did!'<sup>48</sup> In early July 1967, soon after the Gascoignes obtained the lease for an elevated site in Anstey Street, Pearce, for the sum of \$2200, Ben wrote to Bischoff to explain his requirements, adding that it had been '[i]mpossible to do anything until we had settled on a block'.<sup>49</sup>

Gascoigne's extensive notes reveal that the concept of the Gascoigne House was based on maximising the potential for observation. Both external and internal environments were to be framed and defined by the house, which was to become a form of habitable optical instrument. In regard to looking outwards, views of varying depth were to be provided through the garden and over the Woden Valley to the distant Black Mountain. In the other direction, the house was to turn its back to the street:

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45 Janet Hawley, 'A Late Developer', [Good Weekend], *Sydney Morning Herald* (15 November 1997): 44.

46 Martin Gascoigne, *New Zealand Lives: The New Zealand Families of Rosalie Gascoigne and Ben Gascoigne*, 8.

47 Rosalie Gascoigne, in MacDonald, *Rosalie Gascoigne*, 22.

48 Ben Gascoigne, Interview by the author, 26 November 2007.

49 Ben Gascoigne to Bischoff, 2 July 1967, Bischoff, Theo, ACT Heritage Library, HMSS 0159, Box 4, Project Files, 'Prof. Gascoigne House, Anstey St., Pearce, 1968–1970'. Decimal currency was introduced to Australia on 14 February 1966.

The block is on the NE slope of Mt Taylor, and has a NE aspect and views E and N. It runs N–S, with a fall of about 1 in 15. We bought it chiefly because of the aspect and view, of which we want to take full advantage, and with this in mind envisage a house with its back to the road and living rooms looking out N or NE, across a terrace to a native garden in the lower part of the block.<sup>50</sup>

Rather than being detached from its setting, the house was to be a natural extension of the site—to appear ‘as if it grew out of the block’. It was, nevertheless, to maintain a distinction between inside and outside, and a reasonable degree of privacy. Inside, the emphasis was on facilitating the display of art. The overriding function of internal spaces was to provide naturally illuminated wall surfaces for hanging pictures, and horizontal benches for constructing and displaying ikebana arrangements. The dining space—which was to double as Rosalie’s ikebana studio—was to be a simple room, possibly enclosed by white-painted, bagged brick walls, with plenty of natural light. It was to be a long room, with a large table and strong shelves for supporting vases and containers. Views from the kitchen were particularly important. Ben envisaged the various spaces being linked together by a well-lit hall, possibly containing a skylight, which would also double as a gallery space. Along with these written instructions to his architect, Ben included an outline sketch plan and schedule of areas.<sup>51</sup>

## Protégé

Like Grounds and Boyd, Bischoff was a native Victorian and a graduate of the School of Architecture at the University of Melbourne. But while his mentors both remained in Melbourne, Bischoff decided early in his career that the best opportunities were to be found by relocating to Australia’s rapidly developing capital city. In a career that spanned 30 years in Canberra, he designed, documented and supervised a large number of buildings, ranging from private houses to CSIRO laboratories and facilities for government departments. After initially working in private practice, Bischoff joined the ACT Region of the Commonwealth Department of Works.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Although the sketch is referred to in Ben Gascoigne’s letter, there is no copy of it in the Bischoff or Gascoigne archives.

Born in Oakleigh, Melbourne, in 1927, Bischoff attended the Murrumbidgee State School from 1932 to 1937. He received a Daffyd Lewis Trust scholarship, which allowed him to enrol at the University of Melbourne. Not knowing whether to enter surveying or architecture, Bischoff eventually settled on the latter, and entered the School of Architecture, headed by Leighton Irwin, in 1945. In early 1947, Irwin was replaced with Brian Lewis, who became the inaugural Age Professor of Architecture. Lewis's pedagogical approach emphasised the practice of architecture, based on a sound knowledge of building construction, complemented with an appreciation of fine arts. But in late 1947, Lewis left his position at the School of Architecture to become consulting architect for The Australian National University. Arranging for Grounds to replace him, Lewis recruited a series of part-time lecturers including Boyd, Raymond ('Ray') Berg, George Mitchell and John Mockridge.<sup>52</sup> Other lecturers whom Bischoff encountered during his studies included Frederick Romberg, Fritz Janeba, Keith Mackay and structural engineer Norman Mussen.<sup>53</sup>

In the spirit of his immediate predecessor, Grounds emphasised a 'back-to-basics' approach to teaching architecture. A natural showman, he devised novel ways of introducing students to building materials—sometimes with unexpected results. On one occasion, after asking students to bring in two bricks each the following day, he found himself bricked inside his office.<sup>54</sup> Grounds developed a reputation as an architectural guru, often inviting students back to his Toorak house or to spend weekends engaged in 'talk-fests' at his country house at Ranelagh, Mount Eliza.<sup>55</sup> Bischoff established bonds with Grounds, and with Mussen and Mackay, whose office—Mussen, Mackay and Potter, Architects and Engineers—he worked in after graduating with a Bachelor of Architecture degree in 1951. Phoebe Bischoff, who married Theo in the same year, remembered Mussen, Mackay and Potter working together on projects with Grounds—or later with Grounds, Romberg and Boyd—when they set up their partnership in 1953. She also recalled the two of them being invited to stay at Grounds' country retreat in Marysville.<sup>56</sup>

When Mussen, Mackay and Potter replaced Lewis as architects for the John Curtin School of Medical Research building in 1953, Mussen and his wife, Ruth, moved to Canberra to set up a branch office in a room of Lewis's newly completed University House. Bischoff, who had worked for the firm for barely two years, was offered a position as supervising architect for the John Curtin School—an opportunity he gladly accepted. There were a number of advantages associated

52 Geoffrey Serle, *Robin Boyd: A Life* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1995), 104.

53 Conrad Hamann, *Modern Architecture in Melbourne: The Architecture of Grounds, Romberg and Boyd, 1927–1971* (PhD dissertation, Visual Arts Department, Monash University, 1978), 45–6.

54 Serle, *Robin Boyd: A Life*, footnote, 104.

55 Ibid., 63, 104.

56 Phoebe Bischoff, In discussion with the author, 13 January 2009.

with working in the University House office. These included the proximity to the building site—a mere 300 m away—and the opportunity to meet potential university clients such as Pike and Marshall.<sup>57</sup>

After the John Curtin School building was completed and occupied in 1957, Bischoff joined Mussen, who had by then established his own practice in Canberra as a consulting engineer. A brilliant mathematician, Mussen published widely—and sometimes in unexpected locations. When Peter Burns published Mussen's 'There are Only Numbers' in the first edition of *Architecture and Arts* in July 1952, he thought the topic was so unusual that he claimed: 'Here, possibly for the first time, an article on mathematics is included in an art magazine. Only after reading this absorbing article, will it be realised why some people place the art of mathematics before all others.'<sup>58</sup> Mussen introduced his essay with a brief polemic on the advantages of a cool, detached mind that was oblivious to the subjectivities, shortcomings and frailties of the specific individual—in other words, a scientific mind. Mussen's approach, which essentially called for an appreciation of beauty in numbers, was close to that of Philip—for whose house Mussen had been structural engineer. While in Mussen's office, Bischoff discovered a building site in Griffith that was part of a disused quarry. With no-one else interested in purchasing it, the Bischoffs took over the lease and Theo designed a house for his own family. Completed in 1959, the Bischoff House at 47 Carstensz Street, Griffith, contained many ideas that would become part of his domestic vocabulary: rectangular plan, northern orientation, concrete floor slab, unpainted brick walls and low-pitched, gable roof of galvanised iron.

In 1960 Bischoff left Mussen to set up his own Canberra practice. By that time Grounds, Romberg and Boyd were expanding their Canberra operation, and he began to assist them on various projects. In 1960 he helped Boyd with the leaking roof on the Fenner House, and with tenders for the Philip House. He assisted Grounds, Romberg and Boyd with the Japanese Ambassador's Residence at 114 Empire Circuit, Yarralumla—which was designed by the Japanese Government Architect, I. Shimoda—and supervised the Forrest Townhouses at 2 Tasmania Circle and 3 Arthur Circle. In 1964 Bischoff formed a partnership with John Scollay and Tony Pegrum. A flexible arrangement, it allowed each partner to work on individual projects while providing an opportunity to collaborate on larger commissions when required.

Bischoff was a rigorous, methodical and highly organised designer who believed that a thorough understanding of the technical aspects of architecture was one of the keys to successful design. He had an intimate knowledge of the properties of timbers and other building materials, and of the principles

<sup>57</sup> Marshall, a microbiologist, and his wife, Kathleen, worked under Fenner in the John Curtin School.

<sup>58</sup> *Architecture and Arts* 1, no. 1 (July 1952).

behind construction techniques and mechanics. His sketch plans and working drawings—hand-drawn in ink, with notation in a combination of stencil and hand lettering—were so precisely executed that they appeared as precursors of computer drawings.

Bischoff's domestic architecture reflected all of this. Precise, reductive, simply planned and practically detailed, these houses were, at the time they were built, amongst the most refined and understated modernist designs in Canberra. He impressed many clients with his eye for detail. Wendy Benson, a client whose house Bischoff designed at 61 Quiros Street, Red Hill, in 1962, described how he 'even measured wall spans to ensure that small pieces of brick were not needed, only whole or half pieces'.<sup>59</sup> But Bischoff was far from a detached technocrat. Like his friend and mentor Grounds, he was motivated primarily by client needs. He believed in getting to know his clients well before he started designing, and was careful to incorporate appropriate spaces to meet their individual needs. Dorothy Clark, whose house at 210 Dryandra Street, O'Connor, Bischoff designed in 1958, confirmed that their architect had listened to their wishes, providing her and her husband, George, with their 'exact needs and tastes'.<sup>60</sup> Douglas and Louisa Pike's son Andrew recalled Bischoff coming to meet his family on a number of occasions in 1965 to discuss the planning of their house. He and his brother—both teenagers at the time—were impressed that Bischoff took the time to ask them what requirements they had for their bedrooms.<sup>61</sup>

Like Grounds, Bischoff generally worked with a limited vocabulary of forms and material. Following detailed discussions with clients in the preliminary stages, he tested various permutations and combinations of these forms until the final resolution was reached. The end result was a varietal family of different plan forms that Bischoff recalled in the form of tiny, almost iconic 'general layout' sketches.

Whitelaw regularly interviewed Bischoff and his clients, featuring the results in her weekly 'Homes and Building' columns. In these articles, she reinforced how Bischoff attempted to understand his clients' requirements. She explained how he designed houses that were not 'foregrounds'—elaborate, formal statements that dominated the site—but were 'backgrounds'. Neutral, recessive and in harmony with the site, they provided backdrops to their clients' lives. Whitelaw stated that the Watson House, at 13 Waller Crescent, Campbell, not only provided comfort and convenience, it also formed 'an encouraging background' to the Watsons' way of living, and 'grew from the owners' requirements, the particular site conditions and the materials and methods of construction'. In the

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59 *Canberra Homes*, Undated copy held by Phoebe Bischoff; author not named.

60 *Ibid.*

61 Andrew Pike, In discussion with the author, 8 September 2007, Canberra.



same way that Grounds used natural materials and natural colours to visually anchor his buildings to their site, Bischoff specified that the brick walls of the Watson House were to be bagged and 'left the natural sandy colour of the mortar'.<sup>62</sup>

Whitelaw described 'a timeless quality' in the house that Bischoff designed for medical practitioner Dr Aubrey Tow at 56 Vasey Crescent, Campbell—a house that was completed in 1964 and is currently owned by members of the Gascoigne family.<sup>63</sup> The Tow House, which she described as 'twentieth-century Georgian', was similar to the Philip House in its modernist interpretation of that style. A two-storey house with a symmetrical street frontage, and with the horizontal lines of the cantilevered first-floor slab and roof eaves countered by regularly spaced, slender steel columns, the Tow House, like its predecessor, made gentle allusions to Georgian precedents. It was constructed of similar materials and finishes to the Philip House: face brickwork in a blue-brown colour, low-pitched metal deck roof, and ceilings and deep eaves soffits lined with matching limed ash boarding. The main departures from the Philip House were in the external proportions—longer and lower—and the direct, central external access stair. Ben and Rosalie Gascoigne retained a copy of Whitelaw's article on the Tow House for future reference.<sup>64</sup>

The Gascoigne House, which Bischoff designed in 1967 and 1968, was one of his last domestic commissions.<sup>65</sup> Throughout the briefing, design and construction stages, he made a concerted effort to ascertain the clients' wishes, to formulate appropriate design responses, and to clearly communicate his intentions.

In July 1967, a short time after Bischoff had received Ben's written brief, he met with his clients at their Dugan Street house. He made detailed notes of the family: 'Parents, 2 grown-up boys, girl 17'; the number of bedrooms: 'Parents', Girl, Boys and Study'; and the total spaces required: '3 bedrooms, 1 study, separate entrance hall, separate dining room, kitchen, living room'. Opposite these room names, he jotted down cryptic notes to remind himself of specific requirements: 'many paintings'; 'ikebana display—inside, working space inside and outside'; below, he repeated in capitals '*IKEBANA in various states of disarray*'; 'lots of callers but only a few parties'; 'no steps'; 'neutral and light and informal'; '*house on the ground, easy access to garden*'; 'strong, plain statement'; 'not formal, not novel'; 'outside brown inside white'; 'Car 2'; and 'storage (mainly of ikebana)'.<sup>66</sup>

62 Ann Whitelaw, 'House and a Half at Campbell', *The Canberra Times* (25 October 1963).

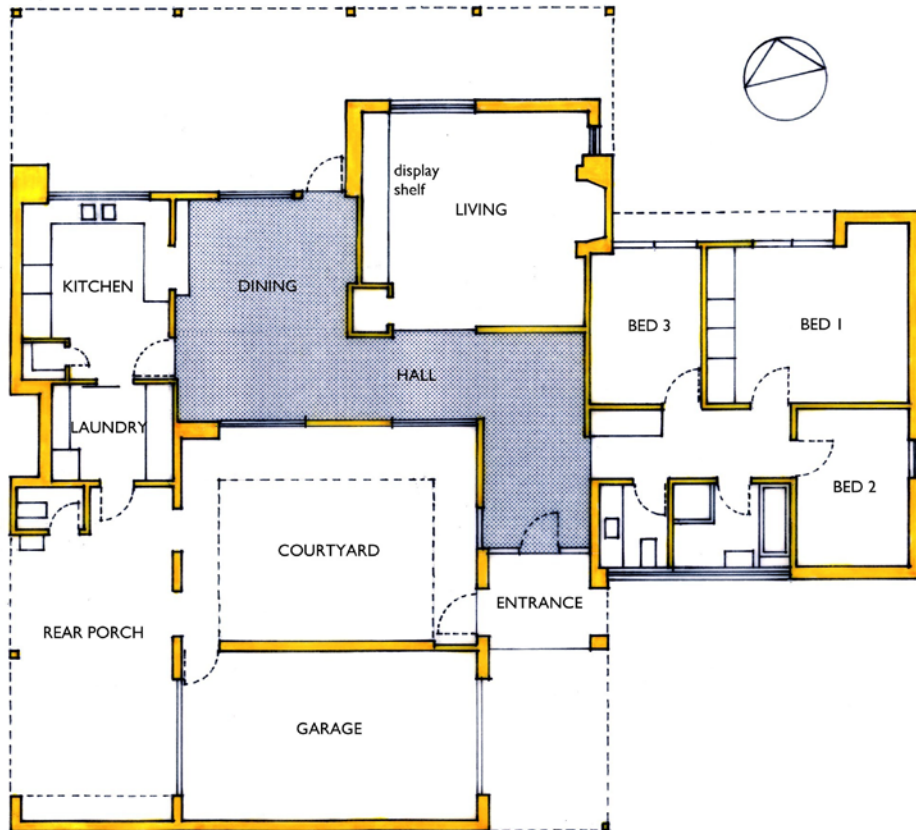
63 Ann Whitelaw, '20th Century Georgian: Timeless Quality of Simple Lines', *The Canberra Times* (16 April 1968). The house is currently owned by Toss and Lyn Gascoigne.

64 Papers of Ben Gascoigne, 1938–2007, Box 4 (House).

65 The Gascoigne House was completed in 1969. Two years later, Bischoff's practice with Scollay and Pegrum was dissolved and he joined the Commonwealth Department of Works.

66 Theo Bischoff, Handwritten note on file, Undated [but most likely between 2 July and 20 July 1967], Bischoff, Theo, 'Prof. Gascoigne House, Anstey St., Pearce, 1968–1970'.

After discussing the above requirements, Bischoff asked: 'Do you have any other ideas about the house?' Ben replied: 'well, we see a house running across this way, and perhaps a kitchen here and a dining room there, living room there and a bedroom there.'<sup>67</sup>



**Figure 5.4 Gascoigne House, floor plan**

Image: redrawn by the author from Theo Bischoff. Courtesy of Phoebe Bischoff

In January 1968, Bischoff wrote to Ben confirming the discussion, and describing his preliminary design. Bischoff explained that the main rooms were to face north, and would open off a gallery that extended around a courtyard, enclosed on the street side by a garage and store. The main rooms would open onto a terrace along the northern side, and would overlook the main garden, with a distant view across the Woden Valley. The house was to be constructed of concrete floors and face brickwork, with a timber-framed roof covered with steel decking. There was to be an emphasis throughout on natural finishes:

<sup>67</sup> Ben Gascoigne, Interview by the author, 26 November 2007.

windows, doors and selected internal walls were to be timber, while the standard of finish was to be similar to that of the Pike House. Bischoff estimated the cost of the proposed house to be \$21 000. Like Seidler, he recommended to his clients that the best option would be to negotiate a price with a selected builder. He suggested Hubert Roetzer of 54 Girraween Street, Braddon, who had ‘successfully completed a number of houses’ for his clients.<sup>68</sup> Ben approved the completed documents in June 1968, and in July a tender of \$21 670 was received from Roetzer. After ensuring that finances were approved, Ben signed the contract documents on 22 August 1968.<sup>69</sup>

## ‘Entry into the Art World’

To me, as to all of us, her work was so intimately associated with her domestic setting...the house really marked her entry into the art world. It gave her space, and she wanted space in which you could assemble things.

— Ben Gascoigne<sup>70</sup>

By Christmas of 1968, Roetzer was making good progress on site. Until that time it had largely been Ben who had driven the project. But now Rosalie—who never drew or planned her own work in advance, but preferred to work directly with the materials themselves—could see the internal spaces taking shape, and began to have ideas of her own.<sup>71</sup> Following Rosalie’s instructions, Bischoff provided sketches and quotations for a series of horizontal surfaces for constructing and displaying sculpture in various locations throughout the house and garden. These included a 450 mm wide by 975 mm high ‘polished dark wood shelf’ to the living room, a 300 mm by 50 mm ‘rough-work’ bench to the west terrace, and a 3000 mm by 750 mm workbench on legs to the garage. Ben claimed that the living-room shelf, which was ideal for big, heavy vases, was ‘a brilliant idea’ that had ‘made the house’.<sup>72</sup>

68 Papers of Ben Gascoigne, 1938–2007, Box 4 (House).

69 Bischoff, Theo, ‘Prof. Gascoigne House, Anstey St., Pearce, 1968–1970’.

70 Ben Gascoigne, ‘The Artist-in-Residence’, in *From the Studio of Rosalie Gascoigne* (Canberra: The Australian National University, Drill Hall Gallery, 2000), 12; Ben Gascoigne, Interview by the author, 26 November 2007.

71 Marie Hagerty, In discussion with Mary Eagle, in *From the Studio of Rosalie Gascoigne*, 20.

72 Ben Gascoigne, Interview by the author, 26 November 2007.



**Figure 5.5 Rosalie Gascoigne with *Ikebana*, Gascoigne House, c. 1969**

Photograph: National Archives of Australia. NAA: A1501, A9510

The Gascoignes had asked Bischoff for a house that was ‘neutral and light and informal’, but was also a ‘strong, plain statement’. They required a building of mass: solid walls for paintings, and heavy timber shelves and benches for sculptures. Views to the outside were important, where required, and so was the admission of natural light. But, as Rosalie had requested, these were to be framed views rather than expansive areas of glass. The predominant condition was to be solidity, with a clear demarcation between inside and outside. And so the house was primarily constructed of masonry: concrete floor slab and brick walls.

When it was completed, the house generated two unexpected responses. The first was that a neighbour lodged an objection to the corrugated-iron roof—an objection that the Department of the Interior dismissed. The second response

was that Ben was 'alarmed by it, and rather appalled because it was empty'. With nothing to cover the internal surfaces and no objects to focus the eye, the building materials themselves became dominant, and the plain surfaces and natural materials assumed an institutional appearance. As Ben explained: 'And just being plain brick walls, and this courtyard out there like a prison yard...I thought "by golly, you know, this could just about be a branch of the prison!"'

But Bischoff had not done his clients a disservice, and Ben's fears soon dissipated. Once Rosalie began to bring in her artworks and materials, the house took on a different appearance: 'Once we got it going and we got our furniture and hung a few things on the wall...it certainly became very integral to what we did.'<sup>73</sup>

The increased space for storing materials provided Rosalie with more opportunities for hoarding—a situation she fully exploited. As Ben recalled:

She began collecting on an ever-increasing scale, and over what now seems a very short period she had accumulated an incredible variety of stuff (there is no other word)—telephone pole insulators, swan feathers from Lake George, sheets of corrugated iron (especially from the old brickworks), postcards and old photographs, discarded beer-cans, bleached bones, sea shells, battered enamel-ware, dried grasses and other vegetation, bric-a-brac from old country fair sideshows, and boxes, always more boxes.<sup>74</sup>

With Ben now travelling frequently for work, Rosalie felt more than ever that she needed 'something to fill the vacuum'. This was when she decided to get 'into art in a big way'—a process she instigated by making things 'all over the house'.<sup>75</sup> As her reputation in the art world spread, journalists and writers visited her at home to report on her progress. The articles they published after these visits confirm just how important the house was to Rosalie's art. In 1970 one writer noted that Rosalie had displayed 'an arrangement of two pieces of dried fern and a berry branch in an old motorcycle petrol tank in her elegant entrance hall'.<sup>76</sup> Two years later, an article in *Vogue Living* described the house as a 'gallery and studio: extremities piled with rusting iron shapes, logs, twigs, bundles of seed heads, cartons of broken glass; and shelves and mantels inside showplaces for the sculpture and other art works these things ultimately become'.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ben Gascoigne, 'The Artist-in-Residence', 10.

<sup>75</sup> MacDonald, *Rosalie Gascoigne*, 25.

<sup>76</sup> Author and publication unknown, from a cutting of an article titled 'Ikebana Fad Spreading in Australia', in Rosalie Gascoigne's scrapbook, cited by MacDonald, *Rosalie Gascoigne*, 19.

<sup>77</sup> *Vogue Living* (May 1972).





**Figure 5.6 Gascoigne House, hall with artworks by Rosalie Gascoigne, c. 1975**

Photograph: Rosalie Gascoigne Archives

By the time Matt Abraham visited, the artist's collection had spread in all directions. He observed how 'Rosalie Gascoigne has a house full of junk. Old newspapers, pieces of wood, bunches of twigs and grass stalks, faded tobacco tins, empty shotgun shell, feathers and rusty corrugated iron are among the discards of man and nature which litter every room of her Canberra home.' He was shocked to find that one artwork, made from newspaper and titled *Paper Squares*, almost reached the ceiling. Even the outside walls of the house were not exempt: there the artist had placed other works to weather over time.<sup>78</sup> Jacqueline Rees, writing for *The Canberra Times*, also noted how Rosalie's work was not limited to the interior of the house. She observed '26 yards or so of threaded sheep bones' in the Pearce garden.<sup>79</sup> Rosalie only constructed two of these monumental bone sculptures, which formed a transition between ikebana and her later installation works. Perhaps that was just as well, because they became the subject of some consternation from a neighbour.<sup>80</sup>

The house became a central character in Rosalie's own narrative. When Martin left Canberra to take up his first overseas posting in late 1971, she began writing

78 Matt Abraham, *The Advertiser* [Adelaide] (28 February 1980).

79 Jacqueline Rees, *The Canberra Times* (20 June 1974).

80 MacDonald, *Rosalie Gascoigne*, 22.

to him regularly, explaining in minute detail what she was thinking and doing. After finding '300 wooden blocks' at Captains Flat in June 1972, she proceeded to place them in rows 'on top of the wrought iron table' in the dining room. In May of the following year, she discovered an abandoned apiary near Gundaroo, and brought back 22 weathered wooden bee boxes of 'faded pink, green, brown and white paint'. That night she piled them up in the 'gallery between [the] sitting room and courtyard and was amazed at how good they looked'. Her only concern was to prevent Ben from 'making an unguarded left turn when he returned home' and discovering her latest acquisitions. She later stacked the crates on the terrace outside the dining room, but believed they did not look so good there, and required the 'confinement of a gallery and not so much sky'. In February 1976, after finding an entire circus sideshow discarded at the Bungendore dump, she wrote enthusiastically to Toss: 'I have the house to myself for a fortnight, and am busy sorting out my circus... The place looks like sideshow alley at the Queenbeyan [sic] show.'<sup>81</sup>

In early 1978 Rosalie described how: 'The pale beer cans [*Early Morning*] are sitting on a corner of mantelpiece above Jim's flower bucket [*Bucket of Flowers*] and beside the lino on wood panels [*River Banks*] and it looks very good to me.' In some of these descriptions the house appeared to take on the role of an active, although not always cooperative, participant—one that was sometimes capable of thwarting her ambitions. When she found herself watching 'a large arrangement [of dismantled drink boxes] over the fire place', Rosalie claimed to 'have also held the window corner with a corner piece of the same height but can't get the reading I want as the window is recessed after the chimney breast'. On other occasions, the house was simply too small to cope with the scale and vibrancy of the works. This was the case with *Parrot Country*, another work constructed from dismantled drink boxes. Consisting of three large panels of horizontal red, green, yellow and white painted boards (which she later modified to become four panels), *Parrot Country* took up 'the whole width of the white alcove' in the living room. Although Rosalie found it 'very dashing—all sideways flight', she admitted to feeling 'quite ill sitting in the room with it', and concluded that it would be more appropriate in a gallery space. She quickly removed the cause of her nausea—which eventually found a more fitting home in the cavernous spaces of the Jasmax Architects-designed Museum of New Zealand, Te Papa Tongarewa, in Wellington—and replaced it with a smaller work constructed entirely of white boxes. This she found to be 'quite beautiful and restful'.<sup>82</sup>

81 Rosalie Gascoigne to Toss Gascoigne, 8 March 1976, Rosalie Gascoigne Archive.

82 The letters were written between 1971 and 1980. Extracts from some of these were selected and edited by Mary Eagle, *From the Studio of Rosalie Gascoigne*, 29–61. For quoted extracts, see pp. 35, 37, 41, 52, 55, 60 and 61.

In another letter, Rosalie explained how she was observing an installation of thistle stalks that she had found in the new suburb of Erindale: 'I have it cleaned and piled in the passage between the courtyard and the sofa.' In a reference to the quality of natural light that would have pleased her architect, she described how the installation reflected the light, producing 'a beautiful metallic grey'.<sup>83</sup>

As a setting in which Rosalie could collect objects, assemble them and observe them, the Gascoigne House was an unqualified success. Part of the reason for this might have been Bischoff's empathy for his client: Phoebe Bischoff believed there was an affinity between Theo and Rosalie due to Theo's parallel interests in fossicking and art.<sup>84</sup> Rosalie herself believed that her architect was 'very sympathetic' to what she did.<sup>85</sup> In fact, the house was so closely tailored to her requirements, the floor plan can be considered as a virtual diagram of her activities. Rosalie's domain was a spine, measuring up to 2.3 m wide, which extended from the specially designed, wide front door—through which she carried her materials—around an 'L'-shaped hall and gallery space where she displayed her work, and into the dining room, her main work area.

Bischoff covered the floor of this zone with 150 mm square semi-glazed tiles, and clad the walls with continuous vertical boards of tongue-and-groove, 'V'-jointed alpine ash. The combination of these materials separated this area, visually and aurally, from the remainder of the house, and enhanced its location as a central domain. The remainder of the house and garden were extensions of this central zone. From her work table, Rosalie could observe the courtyard where she stored her materials and works in progress. Through the courtyard, she could access a series of semi-enclosed working spaces on the southern side of the house (the rear porch and west terrace). From the dining room, she could look to the north, across the garden towards the Woden Valley, and could walk out onto the open north terrace. In this reading of the Gascoigne House, the kitchen, laundry, living room and separate bedroom and bathroom wing were ancillary to this central zone of activity.

In addition to providing spaces in which Rosalie could view her assemblages, the Gascoigne House allowed visitors to view the completed works in carefully constructed settings—a development that contributed significantly to her rapid ascension within the art world. The house, with her works in progress all around, was where she met fellow artists such as Michael Taylor. It was Taylor, a painter who lived at Bredbo, NSW, and taught at the Canberra School of Art, who, perhaps more than anyone else, convinced Rosalie that she could become

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83 Ibid.

84 After arriving from Victoria, the Bischoffs explored the countryside, rubbish tips, roadsides and antique shows for various items, particularly Australian items. Theo was also a self-taught watercolourist. Phoebe Bischoff, Correspondence with the author, 19 October 2010.

85 Rosalie Gascoigne, Interview by Robin Hughes, 12 November 1998.

a successful artist. As Martin recalled, Rosalie's work provided the background to their conversations. 'Her thinking revolved around what she was making and the objects—made and half made—were in the room while they talked, for her house was her studio.' Taylor was instrumental in setting up Rosalie's first exhibitions: a solo exhibition at the Macquarie Galleries in Canberra in 1974, and a group show titled 'Artists' Choice' at Gallery A in Sydney the following year.<sup>86</sup>



**Figure 5.7 Gascoigne House, living room with various artworks, c. 1975**

Photograph: Rosalie Gascoigne Archives

When Rosalie's work was removed from the house and exhibited in galleries, some writers stressed the importance of its domestic origins. Hannah Fink believed that Gallery A, a stripped-back sandstone terrace house at 2 Gipps Street, Paddington, was an appropriate setting for that reason:

As it turned out, the formalist context of Gallery A Sydney showed Rosalie's originality in greater relief. There was still a sense in the gallery of the house it had once been, a domestic scale that suited works made in a living room and on a dining room table.<sup>87</sup>

<sup>86</sup> Martin Gascoigne, 'Rosalie's Artists', in Gellatly, *Rosalie Gascoigne*, 35. Taylor helped to convince Anna Simons, the Director of Macquarie Galleries, to show Rosalie's first solo exhibition.

<sup>87</sup> Hannah Fink, 'The Life of Things: Rosalie Gascoigne at Gallery A Sydney', in *Gallery A Sydney 1964–1983* (Campbelltown, NSW: Campbelltown Arts Centre and Newcastle Region Art Gallery, 2009), 150.

A number of commentators observed how Rosalie's art and career flourished during the years that she lived and worked in the Pearce house. Some believed that the house—and a studio built on the southern (street) side of the garage in 1983 to a design by Trevor Gibson—was a fundamental reason for her success. In Rosalie's obituary, Daniel Thomas highlighted two factors that contributed to her success: her husband and her Pearce house and studio. 'Rosalie Gascoigne is survived by her husband, Ben...who long ago brought her down from Stromlo, built her a house for making art in and then a studio.'<sup>88</sup>

In 1982 Rosalie's work was chosen to represent Australia at the Venice Biennale. After that she exhibited extensively in Australia, England, France, Switzerland, Sweden, Korea, Japan, Taiwan and New Zealand. Her art has been purchased by major galleries in Australia and New Zealand, and by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. At the time this chapter was written—approximately 10 years after her death—the Ian Potter Centre of the National Gallery of Victoria was showing a major retrospective of her work.<sup>89</sup>

But while the Gascoigne House influenced Rosalie's art, what of the reverse effect—that of her art upon the house? What is important here is not so much that the house itself was changed through this—as discussed previously, the house did assume different qualities when inhabited by her art—but that Rosalie allowed the art to affect her experiences of working within its spaces. A large part of her early years in Australia was spent exploring the wide, open spaces of Mount Stromlo and the Monaro region. While her working environment at home improved after she left the mountain, the work itself, which was essentially always about landscape, was still informed by the natural qualities of those vast spaces. As Rosalie explained:

After seventeen years living on Stromlo and later in suburban Deakin, I felt defenceless. On Stromlo, there was a feeling of emptiness...I needed art as an extension of what I honestly did like, air, hills, freedom, grass mowing; I am so moved by natural things. Living on Stromlo was lonely, but it provided good quality experience. Standing on the mountain, looking to the Brindabellas is so beautiful. I always wanted to possess it, to set it in time.<sup>90</sup>

And so Rosalie, living and working in the confines of suburban Pearce, attempted to experience a sense of what it was like to be in an open landscape through the process of making her art installations. Her landscape assemblages were a form

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88 Daniel Thomas, *The Australian* (29 October 1999). The studio, which was completed in 1983, was designed by architect Trevor Gibson.

89 See Gellatly, *Rosalie Gascoigne*.

90 Rosalie Gascoigne, 'In Her Own Words', James Mollison and Steven Heath, in Edwards, *Rosalie Gascoigne: Material as Landscape*, 7.



of surrogate spatiality—constructed objects whose large scale and weathered colours provided a sense of openness within the walls that Bischoff had built around her. Rosalie's art became a physical affirmation of her desire to 'possess space'. Attempting to express this in words, the fiercely independent Rosalie appeared, for once, to have borrowed a metaphor from her astronomer husband: 'Nature selects, makes, abandons, is big. We need to be reminded of this because suburbia is boxed in; we need confirmation of an expanding universe.'<sup>91</sup>

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91 Ibid., 8.

