

# Introduction: Domestic Voyeurism<sup>1</sup>

In 2003 I started looking for a house in Canberra. This was not a detective search for a missing house by Robin Boyd, Harry Seidler or Roy Grounds—an attempt to uncover a long lost masterpiece and reveal it to the world. It was a much more prosaic investigation. I was trying to find a house for my family to live in. Like all those looking to buy a house in Australia’s capital city, I faithfully scanned the real estate section of *The Canberra Times* each Saturday morning and prepared a list of houses to visit. Over the next two years, we visited many open houses in the inner northern suburbs of O’Connor, Ainslie and Campbell, and in Forrest, Deakin and Red Hill to the south. Some were further out—Aranda in the north, and Curtin and Pearce in the south. Many advertising brochures were collected, compared and filed away for future reference.

On the whole the houses were a mixed bunch, as one might expect. But every now and then a real gem showed up. Unfortunately, they were usually well out of our price range. A house attributed to Boyd, at 44 Vasey Crescent, Campbell, was one example. So was the house at 32 Holmes Crescent, Campbell, designed by Frederick Theodore (‘Theo’) Bischoff—a former student of Boyd who had moved from Melbourne and established his own office in Canberra. Another Boyd house—‘The Lantern’, at 204 Monaro Crescent, Red Hill—was more affordable, but quite impractical for our needs. A few other significant houses came onto the market, including one at 4 Yapunyah Street, O’Connor, attributed to Seidler.

Most of the houses we inspected were located in the same inner suburbs that, 50 years previously, had been settled by new residents arriving to take up positions in the burgeoning national capital. By the turn of the twenty-first century, these suburbs were in a state of flux. The house sites that had once been on the fringes of Canberra were now set in prime, inner-city locations and were heavily in demand. Many of the original houses they contained—considered substandard by current standards—were being demolished to make way for much larger versions.<sup>2</sup>

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1 ‘Domestic Voyeurism’ follows Beatriz Colomina’s essay on Adolf Loos and Charles Le Corbusier entitled ‘The Split Wall: Domestic Voyeurism’, in Beatriz Colomina, ed., *Sexuality and Space* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), 73–128.

2 It is not intended to give the impression that all significant houses were facing demolition. Many have been retained and some are subject to heritage legislation. Some important houses, however—including Bob Warren’s Ennor House, Oscar Bayne’s first Frankel House and Seidler’s Zwar House—have been demolished.



**Figure ii ‘The Lantern’ (Verge House), Red Hill**

Photograph: the author, 2012

These random intrusions into other people’s domestic spaces opened up an aperture through which it was possible to view certain aspects of Canberra’s social history—aspects that would otherwise have remained hidden from view. Walter Benjamin wrote that ‘to live is to leave traces’, and likened these clues to evidence in a good detective story.<sup>3</sup> While inspecting these houses, it was impossible not to notice the traces of everyday life that their inhabitants had accumulated over decades of living and working. This was especially so because the houses contained evidence of lives that had been particularly rich in artistic, intellectual and cultural experience. Modern sculptures sat in the gardens, and bookshelves were strewn with scholarly books. Hung on the walls of modest houses, virtually hidden from the street by Australian native gardens, were original modernist paintings and prints by some of Australia’s most celebrated artists. The owners of one house had obviously been friends with the painter Arthur Boyd: a photograph amongst his paintings depicted a group of people standing alongside the artist. Many of these houses contained a study, on the walls of which were black-and-white photographs of graduation ceremonies, or of people standing in front of university buildings in various international locations.

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<sup>3</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘Paris: Capital of the Nineteenth Century’, in *Reflections, Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, Translated by Edmund Jephcott (New York: Helen and Kurt Wolff, 1978), 155.

It soon became apparent that a high proportion of the vendors of these houses were scientists or academics—often professors—who had retired from The Australian National University (ANU), or from the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO). To those who were interested in buying the houses, this fact was not as important as other details—such as the gross permissible building envelope or best location for a swimming pool. But to me, the stories of those original inhabitants—how they came to live in Canberra, where they worked and the circumstances under which they commissioned architects to design their houses—became an obsession. It appeared that this was one aspect of Canberra’s history—and of the nation’s history—that had been left out of the discourse. While Canberra’s demographic reputation has generally been that of a public service town, supplemented with periodic influxes of politicians, these houses contained, within their built structure and contents, evidence of another form of settlement—that of a highly educated, cultured and well-travelled intelligentsia.

I found that the occupants of these houses—and others in Canberra—had been responsible for some truly remarkable achievements. These included founding Australia’s conservation and forestry policy; developing microwave technology for radar—the one weapon that Hitler conceded had prevented German victory in the Atlantic; working with J. Robert Oppenheimer on the Manhattan Project; leading world research in nuclear physics, winning a Nobel Prize for physiological research; making major contributions to galactic evolutionary theory; curing the world of smallpox; inventing a chemical process that allowed the manufacture of the contraceptive pill; inventing insect repellent (later manufactured as ‘Aerogard’); calculating the thermodynamics of water movement to maximise water efficiency in dry lands; founding an international movement for the conservation of genetic plant resources; and writing what was once considered by many Australians to be the definitive version of European history in Australia.<sup>4</sup>

But it was their connection to the houses that became most important to me. My search for a house had taken a different turn; no longer looking for one, I was now looking for many. I compiled as many data as I could about Canberra’s clients, architects and houses, and prepared an inventory of architect-designed houses that were built in Canberra during the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>5</sup> To the various lists and guides that were then available, I added details from a variety of other sources: articles from *The Canberra Times*, discussions with residents who had

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4 The scientists and their respective fields were Charles Lane Poole (forestry), Sir Mark Oliphant and Sir Ernest Titterton (nuclear physics), Sir John (‘Jack’) Eccles (neurophysiology), Ben Gascoigne (astronomy), Frank Fenner (microbiology and virology), Sir Arthur Birch (chemistry), Doug Waterhouse (entomology), John Philip (environmental physics) and Sir Otto Frankel (genetics and plant breeding). The historian was Manning Clark.

5 The Select Inventory (p. xvii) is an abbreviated version that covers the houses that are relevant to the book.

grown up in Canberra, and visual observation of houses from suburban streets. *The Canberra Times* articles, most of which were written by Ann Whitelaw under the title 'Homes and Building', were particularly helpful. In many of her descriptions of the houses, she mentioned the occupations of the clients. I began to include a 'client occupation' column on my inventory, and was able to correlate Whitelaw's information with further details obtained from the ACT Electoral Roll, from which it was possible to confirm names, occupations, street addresses and dates of occupation. Publications on the establishment of The Australian National University and the CSIRO, plus histories of the John Curtin School of Medical Research and the Mount Stromlo Observatory, provided more names to be matched to addresses, and to houses. Friends and acquaintances who had grown up in Canberra showed a keen interest in my project; a number of them were the sons or daughters of clients who had commissioned architect-designed houses.

Once the information regarding client occupations was examined, it became clear that scientists were responsible for commissioning the most highly acclaimed houses in Canberra. These were modern houses whose designs heralded a major shift in the accepted way of thinking about domestic design, and a radical departure from previous examples—most of which were based on historical styles. Of the 11 private houses by Grounds, Romberg and Boyd—considered to be Australia's premier architectural firm during the 1950s and 1960s—that were listed on the Royal Australian Institute of Architects' *2006 Tour Guide*, six were commissioned by scientists, one by an academic, and another by a medical researcher. In addition, at least eight private houses on the institute's *Map of Significant Canberra Architecture* had been built for scientists and their families.<sup>6</sup>

This raised a number of questions. Why, in the post-World War II era, had so many members of Canberra's scientific community commissioned modern houses, whose designs signalled such a radical departure from previous examples? The answer to this question, I suspected, would be located somewhere within a series of related inquiries. Where were the areas of overlap between architecture and science during the period of the study? What were the attitudes of the

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6 The six scientists' houses on the *Tour Guide* were those for plant physiologist Philip Trudinger at 144 Dryandra Street, O'Connor; population ecologist John Nicholson at 24 Cobby Street, Campbell; geneticist and plant breeder Otto Frankel at 4 Cobby Street, Campbell; environmental physicist John Philip at 42 Vasey Crescent, Campbell; geneticist Bruce Griffing at 44 Vasey Crescent, Campbell; and microbiologist and virologist Frank Fenner at 1 Torres Street (corner of Monaro Crescent), Red Hill. The academic's house was for Manning Clark at 11 Tasmania Circle, Forrest, while the medical researcher's house was for Dr Hilary Roche at 4 Bedford Street, Deakin. Royal Australian Institute of Architects (ACT Chapter), *Tour Guide to Significant Canberra Architecture*, 2006. The scientists' houses on the institute's *Map of Significant Canberra Architecture* included the Fenner, Frankel, Nicholson, Philip and Griffing houses, plus those for research chemist Arthur Birch at 3 Arkana Street, Yarralumla, designed by Noel Potter of Bunning and Madden, for the Director of the Mount Stromlo Observatory, designed by Henry Rolland of the Architects Department, Federal Capital Commission, and for the principal of the Australian Forestry School at Banks Street, Yarralumla (Westridge House), designed by Harold Desbrowe-Annear.

architects who had designed these houses towards science? And, conversely, what were the attitudes of their clients towards architecture? In what ways did the material form of the houses reflect the ideologies of their architects? And how did those same formal aspects reflect the beliefs, or aspirations, of the scientists?

To find the answers, the study was limited to five houses, designed by various architects, for scientists and their families in Canberra between 1950 and 1970. By studying a specific and limited sample of clients—who all shared a common occupation, time and place—it was believed that information could be observed, evaluated and compared in an attempt to isolate and identify the key underlying issues.

The discovery of a series of letters and other correspondence between architects and their scientist clients was another factor that defined the study group. These documents provided intimate insights into the day-to-day concerns of both parties during the briefing, design and construction phases, and, together with material obtained from interviews and secondary sources, revealed the aspirations that drove both architects and clients in their searches for an appropriate house.<sup>7</sup>

The shift in architectural taste towards modernism signposted by these houses was not unique to Australia: numerous processes of modernisation were under way throughout the country, and in overseas locations, during the period of this study. But while the arrival of modernism was not unique to Canberra, the city was, in itself, a special case. This was due to a combination of factors: Canberra's status as a relatively new, planned capital city, the Australian Government's sanctioning of the centring of science in this location, an exceptionally rapid rate of growth in the immediate post-World War II decades, and the massive influx of educated and informed scientists who arrived in the capital city to find a critical lack of existing houses.<sup>8</sup>

The five houses discussed in this book—the Fenner House, the Zwar House, the Philip House, the Gascoigne House and the Frankel House—all emerged from this extraordinarily highly qualified scientific and intellectual community.

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7 This material was found within the personal papers of the clients at the National Library of Australia, the National Archives of Australia and the Adolph Basser Library at the Australian Academy of Science. The State Library of Victoria's Grounds, Romberg and Boyd collection, and the ACT Heritage Library's Bischoff Collection, provided similar documents from the architects' archives.

8 The nearest equivalent to the Canberra situation, within the international context, would most likely be post-World War II residential communities associated with scientific institutions in North America.