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Former John Batman Motor Inn 69 Queens Road, Melbourne

As an architectural student in Melbourne during the 1960s, Robin Boyd (1919-71) was the hero for me and my peers. Driving slowly up Walsh Street, South Yarra and passing number 22, one could look up to glimpse an illuminated skylight and imagines the great man working over his desk, late at night. Boyd was the greatest advocate for architecture, for Australia and for Modernism, in twentieth century Australia: in his designs, his prolific writing and public statements, as an historian, his teaching, and in his untiring work for the Royal Australian Institute of Architects. The awful void from his cruel and sudden death, remains unfilled, over thirty years later.

He was a member of Australia's greatest family of artists and writers, the Boyd-a'Becketts. His marriage to Patricia was a one of several that linked the two families. He wrote thousands of articles and seven books between 1939 and his death. At least four of Boyd's earlier books were very influential and in some ways, not yet superseded: *Victorian Modern* (1947), *Australia's Home* (1952), *The Australian Ugliness* (1960) and *The Walls Around Us* (1962). He wrote in clear, memorable, persuasive, jargon-free prose.



John Batman Motor Inn, 2002

In 1947, he founded the RAI-*The Age* Small Homes Service, which offered architect-designed houses at affordable budgets. His architectural endeavour was recognised by the RAI in awarding him its Gold Medal in 1970, its youngest-ever recipient. Initial awareness of the significance of architects such as Harold Desbrowe-Annear (45) and Robert Haddon is due to Boyd's work. He was a founder of the National Trust and a member of its first council. He was instrumental in the Trust's acquisition of its first property: Como, South Yarra. It is surprising how much of our view of past Australian architecture has been influenced, even determined by his ideas and observations.

After an early partnership with Kevin Pethebridge and Frank Bell, he developed a partnership with (Sir) Roy Grounds and Frederick Romberg as Grounds, Romberg & Boyd (known as Gromberg: 1953-62) and with Romberg alone, until his death.

69 Queens Road began gestation as a speculative block of serviced apartments, a direct progeny of the Majestic (1912) and Summerland Mansions (1925, 15). It was initially designed by pedestrian commercial architects Bernard Evans and Partners in 1961, for Ross, Marigold and Peter Shelmerdine, of the Myer family. Evans had designed apartments variously in Tudor, Moderne and Modernist styles since the 1930s. Over eighty single room apartments could be packed into four floors of the five-storied building. It was to be a concrete-encased, steel-framed building.

Following his addition to their famous Capers Gold Door Restaurant, Collins Street in 1960-62, and Robin Boyd was engaged by the Shelmerdines to redesign 69 Queens Road in

March 1962, as 'the Capital'. Neil Clerehen has astutely observed that the two firms of architects were engaged for their specific capabilities: Evans the former Lord Mayor, was known to be able to secure building permits, here for a relatively large commercial building in a then residential area; Boyd for his design flair. It was only the second building by the new post-Grounds partnership of Romberg and Boyd.

Boyd scooped a *porte-cochere* out of eight bays of the ground floor, replaced Evans extremely exposed north-west facing picture-windows, with discrete vertical glazing ribbons and extended the frame up to support a sweeping curved over-arching roof, which concealed the lift over-run and water tank as well as embracing a two-storied, honeymoon suite; where I spent the first night of married life, it's views sweeping across the Domain, Melbourne's skyline and Port Philip Bay. This was the first of hundreds of high-rise apartments in St Kilda and Queens Roads to savour these views and be frequently more exposed to the fierce late afternoon sun.

Colours at the John Batman Motor Inn, as it was renamed, were carefully zoned by floors: 'each floor was monochromatic...a play of various golds on the first floor, of greens on the third, blues on the fourth...The penthouse...is in black and white'. All carpets and most furniture were designed by the Boyd firm. Eliza's restaurant occupied the first floor.

As well as being the earliest first class urban motel in Australia, it was the first major public or commercial building to accommodate motor car arrival and parking. It opened in December 1962.

In 1960 in *The Australian Ugliness*, Boyd had written scathing criticism of (American) motels:

In its approach to the public, in social and aesthetic values, in style, the motel often turned out to be a substantial offspring of the ... jukebox. Even the picture theatre in its heyday never sank to this level ... Why should anything with the serious duty of housing weary travellers choose to deck itself in a buffoon's costume patchwork and parti-coloured trappings?

But Boyd's attention was soon drawn to the Mitchell Valley Motel in Bairnsdale (which survives today, largely intact), which had been designed by distinguished architect John Mockridge and developed by builder David Yencken in 1957. (Yencken was later founder of Merchant Builders, first chair of the Australian Heritage Commission, Professor of Environmental Planning at University of Melbourne and head of the Ministry of Planning and Development). It was the second motel to open in Victoria and the first in country Victoria.

As a result, of Boyd's surprised admiration for the Mitchell Valley, Yencken commissioned him to design the more ambitious Black Dolphin Motel, in Merimbula in 1961, perhaps the most significant motel design in Australia. In the following year, Boyd's design for the Capital evolved into Australia's first urban Motor Inn, the John Batman. In his book on his

own work, *Living in Australia* Boyd clearly expresses his view of the significance of the Black Dolphin and the John Batman in bringing dignity and sophistication to a vulgarised building type, the one in the country, the other in the city:

... when they were planned, each of these buildings set out its own way to challenge practically everything in design that the established motel chains stood for at the time, from their floral carpets to their multi-coloured chequerboard tiling. Each was a highly personal private enterprise, although each aimed its sights higher than the known average taste, the two were necessarily different. For the John Batman named after one of Melbourne's founders was highly urbanised in concrete; and the Black Dolphin, named to evoke a holiday mood used thick trunks of gumtrees as columns throughout. Nevertheless, in the choice of finishing and furnishing materials and in the surrounding vegetation, both establishments consciously sought to produce an Australian character. They were the first motels to do so.

Ironically the working drawings for the John Batman were mostly completed by Graeme Gunn, who was later David Yencken's principal architect for Merchant Builders house designs and head of the Architecture Department at RMIT University.

During the 1970s, the Motor Inn closed and the building was sold to the ANZ Bank as a residential training centre for its management. It later became the Ambulance Officers' Training Centre. In the process, its thoughtful colour scheme was lost and there were other major alterations to Boyd's design. Its current use is unknown.

In 2004, the National Trust declared the Year of Robin Boyd, including exhibitions and an extremely popular opening of ten of his houses in September. The year culminated in the establishment by the Trust of the Robin Boyd Foundation with Hon. Gough Whitlam as its patron. On 15 December, the Trust secured the purchase for the Foundation of Robin Boyd's spectacular and most intact house, 290 Walsh Street, South Yarra, including most of its contents, for the people of Australia. It is to become a centre, for the study of Boyd and Modernism in Australia. This is a development in which I have been proud to have been instrumental.

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