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# *In Search of the Ugliest Country in the World*

Australia vs. Belgium On Robin Boyd,  
Renaat Braem, Regionalism and Post-war  
Modernism

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*Three decades after Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre first introduced the notion of critical regionalism into architectural theory, the concept remains decisively current. One of its manifold recent attestations is Place Makers, an exhibition sponsored by the Queensland government to promote an idiosyncratic Queensland architecture by providing “a fascinating insight into the historical influences on today’s architecture, including responses to the ‘timber and tin’ tradition of the Queenslander, explorations and adaptations of Modernism, and influential efforts to develop both residential and public architecture that is responsive to Queensland’s subtropical environment.”<sup>1</sup> Comparable initiatives can be recognised in Flanders,<sup>2</sup> where the previous architectural yearbook, for instance, received the (revealing) title The Specific and the Singular. According to its publisher, the challenges dealt with in this volume “are to be found at the level of the architectural design and its role in its own context,” thus providing a specific knowledge, “able to contribute to architectural activity in Flanders.”<sup>3</sup>*

*Half a century ago however, this regionalist distinctiveness between Australia and Belgium seemed less outspoken, as two famous modernists, one Australian, the other Belgian, each wrote a narrative on ugliness in which they—in largely similar terms and for ostensibly comparable reasons—criticized the state of architecture (and urbanism) in their respective, geographically distinct built environments. Robin Boyd authored The Australian Ugliness<sup>4</sup> in 1960 and seven years later Renaat Braem baptized Belgium The Ugliest Country in the World<sup>5</sup> in his eponymous publication. This paper traces the professional trajectories of both men and compares their writings on ugliness to unravel similarities and differences in*

1. Miranda Wallace and Sarah Stutchbury, eds., *Place Makers. Contemporary Queensland Architects* (Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 2008).

2. Flanders is the geographical region in the north of Belgium.

3. Maartin Delbeke, et al., eds, *The Singular and the Specific: Architecture in Flanders* (Antwerp: Flemish Architecture Institute, 2012).

4. Robin Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness* (Melbourne: Hawthorn Press, 1960).

5. Renaat Braem, *Het Lelijkste Land ter Wereld* (Leuven: Davidsfonds, 1968).



their approach. Ultimately the question will be addressed how the modernist universalism, which was shared by both Braem and Boyd, interacted with specific cultural, socio-economic and geographical contexts to result in diverging narratives about the impact of modernism on the built territory.

### Boyd and Braem: Education, Training and Ideas

Renaat Braem and Robin Boyd were both born in the early twentieth century—Braem in Antwerp (Belgium) in 1910 and Boyd in Melbourne (Australia) in 1919. From a young age they exhibited a keen interest in architecture, which led them to take up studies in this field. In 1935 Braem graduated as an architect from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp and three years later Boyd completed the diploma course in architecture at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. In the ensuing years, both men rapidly proliferated themselves as protagonists in the field of modernism. After finishing his degree, Braem spent two years in the office of Le Corbusier where he adopted the CIAM-doctrine, while Boyd—after a brief stint in the offices of Henderson, Harold Berg and Walter Bassett—began working for Roy Grounds, an experience that he described as “an inspiration in simplicity, ... clarity and form.”<sup>6</sup>

6. Geoffrey Serle, *Robin Boyd: A Life* (Carlton, Vic.: Miegunyah Press, 1995), 63.

From the early 1940s on they both came to notice as they embarked on a mission to educate the public with regards to (what they deemed) “correct living” by promoting the design of “good,” “modern” and “simple” living environments. In 1942, Braem curated an exhibit in Antwerp, entitled *Schoner Wonen* (more beautiful living), which targeted the population at large as it was permeated with simple didactic messages. Braem paired examples of “good” living with “bad” living, accompanied by drawings and slogans that were to make the visitors aware of the ugliness of their current living quarters.<sup>7</sup> Braem also curated the *Antwerpen Bouwt* (Antwerp builds) exhibit in 1952, for which he designed a model house. A photograph of this exhibit depicting the so-called introduction-wall demonstrates that it was also set up as an instrument for popular education, this time targeting newlyweds. Accompanied by the sketch of a crocodile and the words “the monster of ugliness,” the wall contained four drawings of bedrooms decorated with “heavy,” ornamental furniture on the one end and had Aalto’s *Chair 66* glued to the other end, representing “correct,” “simple’ and “functional” design.<sup>8</sup>

7. Freddie Floré, “(Model)huizen; Stellingnames en Onderzoeksoefeningen binnen de Praktijk van het Bouwen en Wonen,” in *Renaat Braem 1910-2010*, ed. Jo Braeken (Brussels: ASA Publishers, 2010), 214.

8. Floré, “(Model)huizen,” 214.

9. Serle, *Boyd*, 92.

Encouraged by contacts with clients that he met through the Small Homes Service—a facility that he ran between 1947 and 1953, which offered affordable type-plans to aspirational homeowners—Boyd was also hopeful that he could influence public opinion on modern design.<sup>9</sup> In 1949, he participated in the Modern Home Exhibition, themed “Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow,” which—even though its set-up was not as explicitly didactic as Braem’s exhibits—clearly promoted functional modern design for the masses, as it offered thousands of Australians their first close-up look. Two years later, when Boyd’s “Sunshine House,” which he designed for the Small Homes Service, became subject to heavy criticism, his response was once again an unambiguous plea for popular education in the field of modernism and modern design. Boyd wrote:

The policy of the Small Homes Service has never been to provide the public with exactly what it wants. That is the role of the “spec” builder. If we had wanted to build a popular house we undoubtedly would have reproduced the most familiar suburban villa, with a few touches of fancy bricks relieving an otherwise austere and grimly serious monument to habit.<sup>10</sup>

10. Serle, *Boyd*, 97-99.

### On Ugliness

By the 1960s, in spite of their best efforts to educate the public in the practice of “correct” living, both Boyd and Braem seemed deeply disappointed by the way in which their countries had developed and to express their discontent, each authored their (in) famous publication on ugliness. Braem’s *The Ugliest Country in the World* took the form of a seventy-page pamphlet, while Boyd’s 268-page *The Australian Ugliness* was a full-fledged book. The difference in publication format aside and notwithstanding the distinct geography of Australia and Belgium, their narratives—along with the hand-drawn sketches that accompany them—are however surprisingly comparable. Indicative of the time in which they were written, they both commence with a poetic description of a descent into the country by airplane, which Boyd titled “The descent into chaos” and Braem described as “A view of the jungle.”

In broad terms, both Boyd’s and Braem’s accounts on ugliness revolve around four (related) themes: “featurism,” urbanism and planning, environmentalism, and culture.



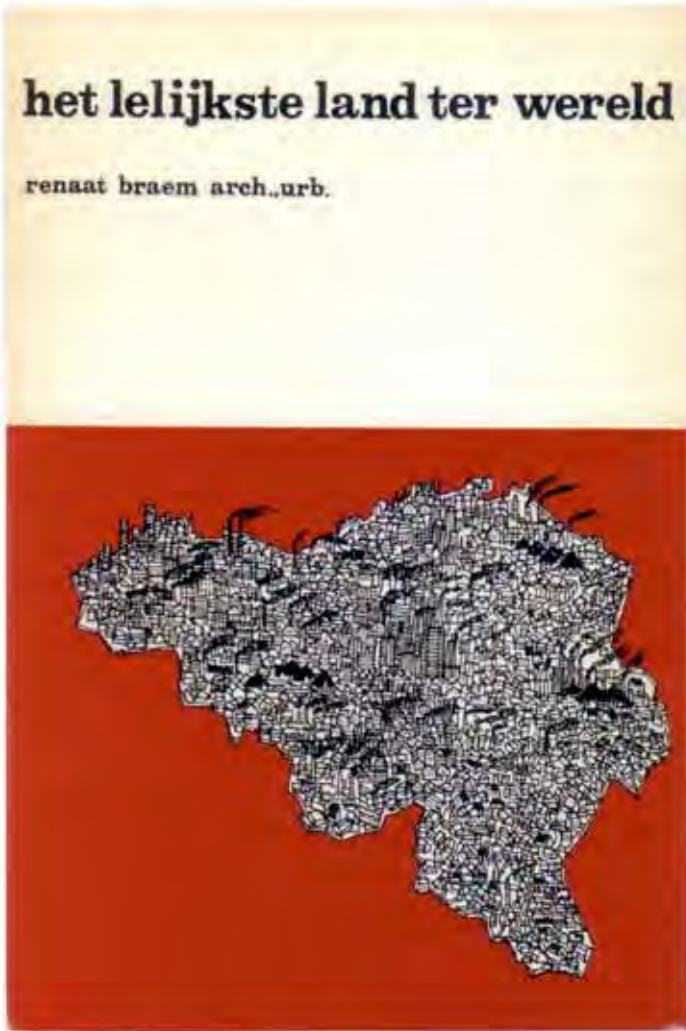


Figure 3. Cover of the publication *Het Lelijkste Land ter Wereld*, 1968. by Renaat Braem, 1968.

The most important stream of thought running through *The Australian Ugliness* is Boyd's critique of what he called "featurism," which in broad terms stands for the subordination of the whole to the accentuation of selected separate features.<sup>11</sup> A phenomenon that Boyd clearly recognised (and lamented) in Australia's contemporary architecture:

This the visitor who arrives by air sees first in a reception lounge inserted into a hanger at the airport. He sees numerous primary colours in paintwork and brilliant plastic chair coverings, richly polished wood trimmings, spun light fittings of bright copper preserved in lacquer, black wrought iron vases shaped like birds screwed to the wall at eye-level

11. Boyd, *Australian Ugliness*, 207.

and holding bright little bunches of pink and orange flower-heads.... Here is a good introduction to Australian ways, and ... the style of Featurism.... Featurism may be practised in Classical or Contemporary style, in the most up-to-date or the dowdiest of old-fashioned manners. It may be found in architecture or in the planning of cities or the design of magazines, espresso bars, neon signs, motor cars, gardens, crockery, kitchenware, and everywhere between, it is the evasion of the bold, realistic, self-evident, straight-forward, honest answer to all questions of design and appearance in man's artificial environment.<sup>12</sup>

12. Boyd, *Australian Ugliness*, 8-10.

When it comes to architecture, Boyd's critique of "featurism" can best be understood through its comparison with modernist principles, which stipulated that a modern building should fulfil the function of the building not only within itself, but within society; that it should respect the nature of materials and structural realities; press technology and methodology into even higher efficiency; give the building a strong expression and renounce all historic allusions and irrelevant beautification. Boyd's denouncement of "featurism" thus complied with the modernist critique of the ornament,<sup>13</sup> which was perceived as a (deceiving) symbol of the old that had to be torn down by the new. Similarly, Braem also campaigned for a straightforward and uncomplicated approach in architecture, which was rational, clean and uncluttered, unlike the contemporary built environment in Belgium that he described in *The Ugliest Country in the World*:

13. Adolf Loos, "Ornament und verbrechen," *Cahiers d'Aujourd'hui* (1913).

Roof-finishes scream their presence through their complex nature, texture and colour; pink asbestos, green slate, red tile, black varnished tiles and outside of the agglomerations, where every now and then a tree reveals that were are in the countryside, cosy pseudo-villas and pseudo-castles boast marvellously cut, thatching roofs, shaped like a page's head.

You can fill up at gas stations in Norman style, colonial style, Flemish style, modern style and industrial-design style. You can strengthen your inner being in hostels with checkerboard curtains and cast-iron signage, [in] "rotisseries" with pseudo timber framing, [in] fries-shops where cut-out cardboard chefs invite you in. Bars can [also] be found in endless variety, from gild houses or *maisons du peuple* with a barren, repulsive, semi-official looking lack of character, to the most inviting little cafés with red curtains and discrete car-parks.<sup>14</sup>

14. Braem, *Lelijkste Land*, 21.





Figure 2. Sketch originally published in *Het Lelijkste Land ter Wereld*, by Renaat Braem, 1968.

Another important strand in their critiques pertains to urbanism. In Belgium and Australia alike, a pressing deficit in housing presented itself in post-war years. During the depression house building in Australia had decreased significantly and there had been no building for most of the war. As a result, an estimated 300,000 units were needed nationally.<sup>15</sup> In post-war Belgium this deficit was also sharply felt and gauged at 250,000 dwellings.<sup>16</sup> Though it is generally assumed that Europe and Australia responded quite differently to this housing demand, generally associating Australia with the single-family house and Europe with medium- and high-density collective housing,<sup>17</sup> the post-war spatial development of Australia and Belgium was not that dissimilar. In Belgium, much like in Australia, the single-family house was the main typology used to mitigate the post-war housing shortage.<sup>18</sup> This, in combination with the absence of a strong planning policy in either country, led to a comparable urbanization pattern, which obscured the distinction between “city” and “countryside” or “urban” and “rural.”

In *The Ugliest Country in the World*, Braem included a chapter on the “Dissolution of urban and rural,” stating that “everything is increasingly dependent on traffic” and the city has become “a shapeless, amorphous blotch on the earth’s surface, without a recognisable order, grown along the path of the least resistance.”<sup>19</sup> Built “according to special zoning plans ... haphazardly, following spec-builders’ land-subdivision-schemes,”<sup>20</sup> he pinpoints the single-family house as one of the main culprits of this spatial disarray and consequently lashes out at its visual traits:

15. Alastair Greig, *The Stuff that Dreams are Made of: Housing Provision in Australia 1945-1960* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1995), 1.

16. Katrien Theunis, “De Wet de Taeye. De Individuele woning als bouwsteen van de welvaartsstaat,” in *Wonen in Welvaart. Woningbouw en Wooncultuur in Vlaanderen, 1948-1973*, ed. Tom Avermaete and Karina Van Herck (Rotterdam: O10 Publishers, 2006), 67-77.

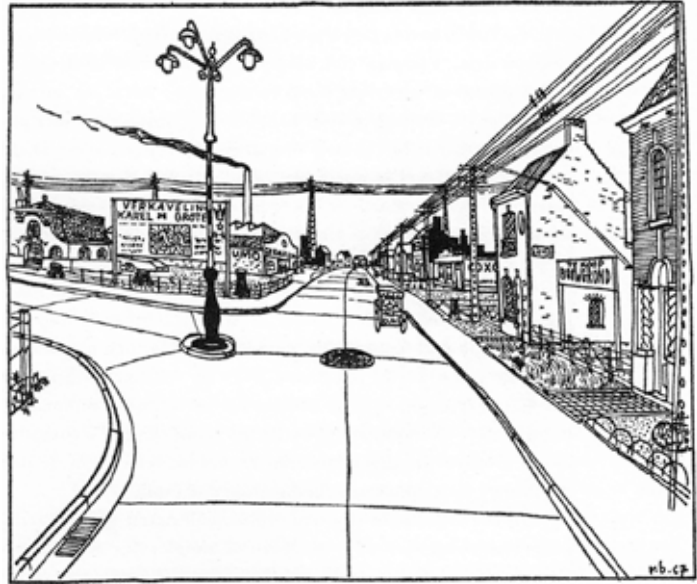
17. Philip Goad, “An Ongoing Preoccupation: Australia and the Small House,” in *Houses for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed. Patrick Bingham-Hall (Sydney: Pesaro Publishing, 2003), 54.

18. Hilde Heynen, “Belgium and The Netherlands: Two Different Ways of Coping with the Housing Crisis, 1945-70,” *Home Cultures* 2 (2010), 159-178.

19. Braem, *Lelijkste Land*, 38.

20. Braem, *Lelijkste Land*, 50.

Figure 3. Sketch “Het platteland, noch stad noch dorp,” originally published in *Het Lelijkste Land ter Wereld*, by Renaat Braem, 1968)



built according to plans in which the involvement of the architect is restricted to placing his signature, [these] ersatz-houses are a covered and sheltered place, but not a living space. Everything about them is deceitful. The façade has no relation with the plan [but] ... has to provide an illusion of wealth through the use of pseudo-keystones, fake bluestone and window-frames. The windows are leadlight, to enhance cosiness and block off the outsider's gaze. In the front porch decorative metal framing. Next to the entrance, a planter with plastic plant. In front of the voile-curtain a “Diane à la chasse,” bronze in plaster, neither visible from inside or to be admired by the passer-by outside ... An exaggeration? Look around. Ninety-nine per cent of what has been built after liberation looks like this. We were freed from barbarity to be occupied by ugliness.<sup>21</sup>

21. Braem, *Lelijkste Land*, 51.

22. Robin Boyd, *Australia's Home: Its Origins, Builders and Occupiers* (Carlton, Vic.: University of Melbourne Press, 1952).

23. Serle, *Boyd*, 117.

In *Australia's Home*,<sup>22</sup> which he authored almost ten years before *The Australian Ugliness*, in 1952, Boyd criticized the haphazard planning and on-going (sub)urbanization of Australia in similar terms as Braem, referring to it as a “half-word between city and country.”<sup>23</sup> However, in spite of his disappointment with what the suburb may have been when he authored *Australia's Home*, in *The Australian Ugliness* Boyd wrote with restraint and respect for their material achievements, bearing in mind their international living standards. In this later publication, his attack on the suburb seems primarily concerned with featurism and lamentable taste





in furnishing, rather than an attack on the suburb itself. Boyd was assaulting Australians in general, who just happened to live predominantly in the suburbs.<sup>24</sup>

24. Serle, *Boyd*, 126.

In *The Australian Ugliness* Boyd did lament the threat that the suburb poses to the environment. He devised the term ‘arbora-phobia’ in reference to the Australian habit of ruthlessly clearing not just the indigenous landscape in readiness for building, but also “the great trees of the cultivated gardens, replacing them with a salmon brick desert.”<sup>25</sup> Braem’s environmental concerns were also largely tied up with his critique of urbanism. “It would be irresponsible to further promote single-family housing,” he said, as “the rapid increase in living standards—resulting in an outward expansion—along with the rise of car-ownership” would rapidly transform “the entire country is one hideous limbo ... in which nature has been completely erased.”<sup>26</sup>

25. Ann Stephen, Andrew McNamara, and Philip Goad, eds., *Modernism & Australia: Documents on Art, Design and Architecture 1917-1967* (Carlton, Vic.: Miegunyah Press, 2006), 910.

26. Braem, *Lelijkste Land*, 61.

A last though not less important point of critique was both modernists’ anxiety about the perceived Americanization and the cultural degrading that affected their countries. Both Boyd and Braem assumed an ambiguous position vis-à-vis the United States, which they saw as both the scene of (technological) progress and the source of a kitsch-oriented consumer culture. What worried Boyd in particular was Australia’s method of copying America which tended to be “the Chinese copy, the parrot’s imitation, the little boy mimicking the brother’s actions without fully understanding what he is doing,” which according to Boyd was “one of the best ways to kill one’s own national culture.” This led him to conclude, “Australia today—at least in the field of the popular everyday visual arts—is losing whatever identity she had.”<sup>27</sup>

27. Stephen, McNamara, Goad, eds., *Modernism & Australia*, 910.

Braem’s critique of American influences in Belgium was less direct than Boyd’s, though he was also very much concerned with the survival of a “real” and “Flemish” culture, a culture that would meet authentic needs while not giving in to consumerist desires, thus preserving a regional cultural identity:

Because our age is devoted entirely to production and consumption, our society has degenerated into an indefinable chaos in which everything is for sale and in which a veritable culture has become impossible. As a result, we Flemings are at risk of simple disappearing.<sup>28</sup>

28. Braem, *Lelijkste Land*, 54.

## On Post-war Modernism and Regionalism

This brings us to a consideration of regionalism. The question arises: How to reconcile the modernist rejection of “ugliness,” which Boyd and Braem undoubtedly shared, with their appeal to foster a regional “Australian” or “Flemish” identity, which would supposedly be different? Was the post-war architectural culture of Australia and Belgium indeed as similar as it appears or should these two accounts of ‘ugliness’ be considered inherently “regional?” Or, are the writings of Boyd and Braem merely regionalized renditions of Ian Nairn’s ubiquitous critique of “subtopia”<sup>29</sup> that both authors projected onto their respective environs? In this concluding section, we argue that their writings were strongly inspired by distinct local contexts and therefore decisively regional. The term “context” should in this case however not be understood following Kenneth Frampton’s definition of regionalism—emphasizing topography, climate, light, materiality and tectonic form—but rather following Paul Walker’s more recent description, which holds that “the sharpest differences between any two architectural cultures ... are not to be explained by climate or topography or any genius loci but rather through their different institutional and political contexts, their different social and cultural histories [and] their different fictional landscapes.”<sup>30</sup>

29. In this special issue of the *Architectural Review* entitled “Outrage”, which was first published in 1955, Nairn criticizes the areas around cities that had in his view been failed by urban planning and were losing their individuality and spirit of place.

30. Paul Walker, “Kenneth Frampton and the Fiction of Place,” in *Shifting Views: Selected Essays on the Architectural History of Australia and New Zealand*, ed. Andrew Leach, Anthony Moulis, and Nicole Sully (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2008), 70-80.

The key difference is the manner in which Boyd and Braem approach the single-family house in their critique. While Braem seemed to deplore the concept and poor planning of the single-family home more than its design, Boyd was predominantly concerned about the home’s featurist aspects. This can already be noticed when simply comparing the titles of their opening chapters. For Boyd, you first had to “descent” into the country to see the “chaos,” which was predominantly played out on the architectural level, while Braem already viewed the “jungle” that was Belgium from the air—referring mainly to the country’s urban situation.

In Belgium, the idea of the single-family house, along with notions of home-ownership, were intricately bound up with the internal politics of a pillarized country. Disagreement between the country’s two main political parties on the appropriate approach to overcome post-war housing shortages housing, led to the establishment of two different housing acts. In 1948 the De Taeye Act, named after its proposer, the Christian-Democrat minister De Taeye, was approved and used premiums and low interest loans to



encourage Belgians to acquire their own homes. The second act, the Brunfaut Act (1949), was named after the socialist member of parliament Fernand Brunfaut and was regarded as the socialist counterpart of the De Taeye Act. It made provisions not only for regular annual financing in respect of the construction of housing clusters by semi-governmental and recognized social housing associations, but also for street layout, including paving, public utilities such as drainage, and open space planning. Ultimately, the voice of the mighty Christian Democrats dominated the housing discourse. By 1954 100,000 De Taeye-houses had been built and in the early 1970s, this figure reached 400,000.<sup>31</sup> The Belgian landscape was thus composed of single-family homes in all shapes and forms, a trend that Braem perceived as a national victory of conservative Christian-democratic values over revolutionary socialist or communist beliefs. Braem was a longstanding member of the communist party and as such opposed to the conservative policy of the Christian-democrats. By building the suburb, Braem felt that the population was undermining the realisation of new social order that in his opinion could emerge through the establishment of collective housing. Braem felt that Belgians needed to throw off the shackles of private home ownership and learn to become new citizens who were more concerned with the common good than with their private interest. He had hoped that in post-war years, the Belgian population would turn away from the (small-minded) “*Vlaamse volksaard*” and participate in the construction of a progressive Flemish culture, which would take its cue from communism as a worldview. His account on ugliness was thus predominantly a response to the reactionary stance that the Flemish population assumed in the post-war decades.

In Australia the percentage of owner-occupiers, and with it the number of single-family homes, also increased dramatically throughout the 1950s and reached almost seventy per cent by the early 1960s.<sup>32</sup> Boyd however pointed out that—unlike in Belgium—“[t]he sanctity of the Australian home as the Australian’s castle was the original unquestioned plank in the platform of all political parties” and that “[e]ven the extreme Left ... never questioned the right of private home ownership.”<sup>33</sup> Boyd’s utterances were later on confirmed by academics such as Peter Williams who conceded that the policy on tenure set forth by the Labour Party displayed more similarities than differences when compared to the policy proposed by the Liberal-Country Party.<sup>34</sup> The increase in home ownership in post-war Australia

31. Theunis, “De Wet de Taeye,” 71.

32. Greig, *The Stuff that Dreams are Made of: Housing Provision in Australia*, 2.

33. Boyd, *Australia’s Home*, 241.

34. Peter Williams, “The Politics of Property: Home Ownership in Australia,” in *Australian Urban Politics*, ed. John Halligan and Chris Paris (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1984), 167-192.

was thus less the result of an ideological tug-of-war than it was the outcome of an extraordinary coalition of economic and social circumstances, including low interest rates for home loans and a deficit in rental housing, prompted by inadequate rent control legislation.<sup>35</sup> Even though Boyd's political preference did not significantly affect his discourse on ugliness, it was nevertheless intricately bound up with the contemporary process of social change that was taking place in Australia. An important influence in the contemporary Australian climate was the ascendancy of the United States in the wake of Britain's decline. While Australia was a new Britannia in the colonial era, in the twentieth century its seaboard cities were wide open to the spread of ideas, technology, capital, and people from the New World. Boyd labelled this condition "Austerica"<sup>36</sup>—a way of life in which an austerity version of the American dream overtakes the indigenous culture.<sup>37</sup>

But Boyd's critique does not end there. In broader terms, he seems irked by the general disorientation that affected the country, as it readily adopted traits from different cultural contexts without much deliberation. "There can be few other nations which are less certain than Australia as to what they are and where they are," he wrote, continuing that "Australia is pulled in three ways at once from three remote point of the compass"—England, America and Asia. Even though Australians continued to refer to England as "home," they eagerly adopted American culture even as they felt the temperature of the "warm Asian waters" that surround them, rising.<sup>38</sup> What Boyd thus seemed to deplore most was the absence of a strong, idiosyncratic Australian culture—a deficiency, which was very palpable in post-war housing as it desperately sought for architectural expression through the integration of detached features from different contexts and periods.

These socio-political differences undoubtedly influenced the way in which Boyd and Braem positioned themselves in the housing-debate. Even though Boyd clearly opposed both the suburb and the concept of the single-family house in the early 1950s, stating that in Australia "every political party was anxious to assist every man to tie the colossal millstone of home-ownership about his neck,"<sup>39</sup> it did not inspire him to actively promote collective housing as an alternative. On the contrary, by the time he wrote *The Australian Ugliness*, his disdain for the suburb appears to have waned. Although he still regarded the suburb as the scene of political failure, poor quality of housing (often resulting from inadequate rental housing, which forced people

35. The lack of appropriate rental housing was the consequence of (1) absence of state investment in rental housing units and (2) the backlash of the rent control act which was passed in the early 1940s by the incoming Labor government in an effort to protect renters in the private market. However, this act led many landlords to sell their properties, forcing the former renters to buy a cheap (often not very well-built) single-family house in the outer suburb property of their own. See: Greig, *Housing Provision in Australia*, 97-120.

36. Boyd's observations on "Austerica" were made just after his 1956-57 trip to the United States as part of his visiting professorship at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

37. Greig, *The Stuff that Dreams are Made of: Housing Provision in Australia*, 144.

38. Boyd, *Australian Ugliness*, 55-56.

39. Boyd, *Australia's Home*, 241.



of limited means to build a cheap house in a period afflicted by scarcity of building materials and building labour) and “arboraphobia,” he also came to accept it as a site for architectural experimentation. For Boyd, finding an Australian identity in architecture, which led him to search for an Australian variant of International Modernism, was more important than challenging the supremacy of the single-family home. In his chapter on “Non-Featurists,” Boyd for instance lauds the house that Harold Debrowe Annear designed for Senator Elliot in Toorak, a suburb of Melbourne, in 1918 as “a good building trying to be sensibly Australian and . . . one of the world’s early pioneers of rational architecture.”<sup>40</sup> The suburb furthermore formed the backdrop for several of Boyd’s own single-family home designs, each of which testify to a desire to innovate, rationalise and respond to local climatological and topographical conditions as he experimented with new materials, innovative structures and ephemeral surface textures that he created through an intelligent play of light and shade.

40. Boyd, *Australian Ugliness*, 101.

Braem more outspokenly rejected the suburb than Boyd. Beyond criticizing its featurist aspects, he opposed to the single-family home as a concept, along with its ideological connotations and urban implications. Influenced by the Russian Constructivists whom he studied during his student years, Braem believed that architecture should be a “social condenser,” leading people away from existing bourgeois living patterns to a socialist way of life, focused around communal activities. This could only be attained through collective housing. The design that best expresses his utopian (communist) visions is the Kiel-estate in Antwerp, which was constructed between 1951 and 1953.<sup>41</sup> Braem consciously lifted these high-rise slabs up above the ground to allow the ground level—which he considered a collective good, belonging to society at large—to function as a collective space in service of the community. The units in the building were relatively small, to encourage Kiel-inhabitants to spend more time outside (such as in the open air galleries) to socialize with their neighbours. The original design also comprised a set of shared amenities, such as a party and conference room, an outdoor playground, a recreation room, shops, etc. Unfortunately, not all of these facilities were realized.

41. Els De Vos, “Living with High-Rise Modernity: The Modernist Kiel Housing Estate of Renaat Braem, A Catalyst to a Socialist Modern Way of Life?” *Home Cultures* 2 (2010): 134-158.

Living in Belgium however, a country where an architect could barely survive without accepting private commissions, Braem eventually also started building private homes. By the end of the

1950s he became increasingly fascinated with the possibility of translating organic shapes that you find in nature, such as plants and seashells into designs for human living environments and from the early 1960s on began translating these ideas into designs for single-family homes. These houses evidently differed significantly from the houses De Taeye-houses that he criticized in *The Ugliest Country in the World*. They were designed to liberate their inhabitants from conventional structures by offering them new spaces that would appeal to their inner self and that would bring them in harmony with nature. The biomorphic shapes of these homes thus embodied his vision on the housing of emancipated individuals who left behind the oppressive constraints of capitalism and Catholicism. Realising these dreams in individual dwellings was the best he could do in political conditions that did not allow him to build the large collective housing estates that he thought were the most appropriate answer to the post-war housing challenge.<sup>42</sup>

42. Hilde Heynen, "The Jargon of Authenticity: Modernism and Its (Non) political Position," in *Constructed Happiness: Domestic Environment in the Cold War Era*, eds. Mart Kalm and Ingrid Ruudi (Tallinn: Estonian Academy of Arts Proceedings, 2005), 10-27.

Notwithstanding the striking analogy between Boyd's and Braem's critiques on ugliness, which can best be understood from the parallelism between, on the one hand, their shared modernist inspiration and, on the other hand, the comparable housing policies in the two countries, both authors' narratives are intricately interwoven with their distinct socio-political contexts and are as such decisively regional.

