

# ULTRA

## Positions and Polarities Beyond Crisis

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# Designing a Critical Voice: Discourse and the Victorian Architectural Students Society (VASS), 1907-1961

**Philip Goad**

University of Melbourne

## Keywords

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## Abstract

Students are a necessary part of the architecture profession. Their training and preparation have long been key to maintaining the business and culture of architecture, and in doing so perpetuating traditional territories that control the institutionalisation of a profession. Students have also created their own associations, often mirroring, and at the instigation of, their parent organizations. More often than not though, in addition to acting as social binders and playing out the role of disciplinary 'club', these associations have developed a critical voice, urging change and injecting critique: in short, setting the basis for the framing of a local discourse.

Using its publications as primary source material, this paper explores the critical activities of the Victorian Architectural Students Society (VASS), which developed under the auspices of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects (RVIA). VASS published its annual from 1908, which evolved by 1932 to become *Lines* and, then additionally in 1939, students Robin Boyd and Roy Simpson expanded VASS's publishing remit, producing the oft-controversial fold-away pamphlet *Smudges* that infamously gave 'blots' and 'bouquets' to new buildings. In 1947, VASS published *Victorian Modern*, Australia's first polemical history of modern architecture and in 1952, it was the first publisher of the influential journal, *Architecture and Arts*. This paper examines the shifting ambitions of VASS, its chief protagonists, the role of graphics and the deft blending of the social, satirical and the critical that eventually framed and shaped Victoria's architecture culture after World War II.

## Introduction

The training and preparation of students has long been essential to maintaining the business and culture of architecture. The architecture profession has a long history of careful management and control of its traditional territories and boundaries that has secured its institutionalisation and sustained its membership. In this regard, institutes of architects are no different from those associated with medicine and the law. Students within those professions have also created their own associations, often mirroring (and at the instigation of) their parent organizations. More often than not though, in addition to acting as social binders and playing out the role of disciplinary 'club', these associations, impatient with their elders, have developed a critical voice, urging change and injecting critique: in short, setting the basis for the framing of a productive local discourse.

Using its publications as primary source material, this paper explores the critical activities of the Victorian Architectural Students Society (VASS), from its inception in 1907 under the auspices of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects (RVIA) to its uncertain demise around 1961. From annual journal to pamphlet-like broadsheet, from monograph to national journal, the publication ambitions of VASS reflected the anxiety felt by its members that the profession should do more to cultivate a vibrant local architecture culture. This paper examines the developing publication agenda of VASS, its chief protagonists, the role of graphics and the deft blending of the social, satirical and the critical that eventually framed and shaped Victoria's architecture culture after World War II.

1. M.H. Port, "Founders of the Royal Institute of British Architects", *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (online). See <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-97265>

2. J.M. Freeland, *The Making of a Profession: A History of the Growth and Work of the Architectural Institutes in Australia* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1971), 104, 215.

3. Edward Bottoms, "The Purple Patch to Sexy machinery: 100 years of AA Student Journals", *AArchitecture*, 1 (Summer 2006): 4-7.

Historically, students had been of key concern to practicing architects and their subsequent professional bodies since the early nineteenth century. In England in 1817, for example, in the absence of formal architectural schools and the reliance on the Royal Academy's lecture series to 'educate', Thomas Leverton Donaldson (1795-1885), later founder of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) in 1834 and the first professor of architecture at University College London, organized an architectural students society to pressure the Academy for better provision for architectural training but it was a venture that met with little success.<sup>1</sup> In Australia, a group of architectural students met in 1888 to form the 'Queensland Articled Pupils' Association' and this was prior to the formation of the Queensland Institute of Architects (QIA) later that year. It was the same in South Australia: a 'Students' Association' was formed prior to the establishment of the South Australian Institute of Architects (SAIA) in 1886. Likewise in 1905 in New South Wales, the Architectural Students Association came into being independent of the local institute, until 1919 when IANSW formally took it under its wing.<sup>2</sup>

As architectural education became more formalized, student associations also formed within those institutions and some began to publish. Students at London's Architectural Association (AA), for example, published *The Purple Patch* or *The Tufton Street Tatler* from 1905-9, then with typically peripatetic interval, *Harlequinade* (1923-6), *Number 35* (1928-30) and between 1938 and 1939, four issues of *Focus*, which, in addition to contributions from students, included articles by Le Corbusier, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and Naum Gabo amongst others.<sup>3</sup> From the outset, these AA student journals oscillated between,

4. Elizabeth Darling, "Focus: A Little Magazine and Architectural Modernism in 1930s Britain", *The Journal of Modern Periodical Studies*, 3, no. 1 (2012): 39-63.

5. "Exhibitions: TASK: A Magazine for the Younger Generation of Architecture" (online). See <https://www.gsd.harvard.edu/exhibition/i-mpei-at-the-gsd/>

6. Clive B. Fenton, "Plan, A Student Journal of Ambition and Anxiety", in Iain Boyd-Whyte, ed., *Man-Made Future: planning, education and design in mid-twentieth century Britain* (London: Routledge, 2007), 174-190.

7. Beatriz Colomina et al, eds., *Clip, stamp, fold: the radical architecture of little magazines, 196X to 197X* (Barcelona: Actar, 2010), 8.

on the one hand, jolly and satirical accounts of AA politics and, on the other, in the case of Focus, earnest entreaties for the AA curriculum to embrace modernist principles.<sup>4</sup> In the United States, Harvard Graduate School of Design (GSD) students launched *TASK* in the US summer of 1941. Like Focus, it too had a short life, with just six issues printed to 1945, with a final double issue in 1948. With war looming, *TASK* editors in their first issue stated that its aim was an "expression of students who realize that architects today are unaware of the rapidly changing needs of society or unable to answer them."<sup>5</sup> A similar sense of urgency for young voices to express their desires and discontent lay behind the spiral-bound *PLAN* (1948-50, 51) produced by the Architectural Students Association (UK).<sup>6</sup> These little student magazines were vital and different from other student or graduate-edited publications like *Perspecta* (1952-) at Yale and host of others thereafter, which emulated academic journals but included design criticism, architectural history and building reviews, and with contributions written largely by academic and critics and not the students themselves. In *Clip, stamp, fold: the radical architecture of little magazines, 196X to 197X*, Beatrix Colomina and her fellow editors highlight the significance of the 1960s "moments of littleness" and their legacy as "the surprisingly permanent but almost invisible record of the pulse of a moment" in their trans-Atlantic survey of radical pedagogies explored through the medium of the little magazine.<sup>7</sup>

However, the publication ventures of the Victorian Architectural Students' Society (VASS) between 1908 and 1961 were different: VASS was not aligned with an educational institution; its longevity as a society meant that its publications and their nature were diverse and attuned specifically to their times; and they were established, designed and written (at least from their beginnings) exclusively by students. As such, in terms of student activity before 1960, they represent a unique phenomenon, overlooked geographically and institutionally, and yet, with surprising international echo.

## VASS beginnings

8. "Victorian Architectural Students' Society of the R.V.I.A.", *Journal of the Proceedings of the RVIA*, 5, no. 3 (July 1907): 97.

The Victorian Architectural Students Society (VASS) of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects (RVIA) was formed in early 1907. Rules for the society were drawn up and approved by the RVIA and a 'syllabus' (program) was printed. VASS held its first ordinary general meeting at the Institute Rooms at 57-59 Swanston Street, Melbourne on 14 May 1907, and in a celebratory mood, "Business was dispensed with for the occasion; several musical items were rendered, and an excellent supper was provided by Mr C.A. D'Ebro, Vice-President, who was the chairman for the evening."<sup>8</sup> At its inception, there was a paternal aspect to the RVIA's relationship with VASS. RVIA President Francis J. Smart declared that:

I would like to say one word about the internal development of the Students' Society. We have every reason to be pleased with the movement. The students have formed an improvement Society and are to hold regular meetings in this room, give essays, have debates and so forth, and visit works and places of interest. The younger men should remember

9. Francis J. Smart, "The Presidential Address for 1907", *Journal of the Proceedings of the RVIA*, 5, no. 2 (May 1907): 42.

that the members of the Institute are always ready to help them in any problems they may have to solve, and they need not be afraid to take advantage of this privilege.<sup>9</sup>

10. Robert Haddon, quoted in Smart, "The Presidential Address for 1907", 44.

RVIA member Robert Haddon agreed, believing that "the Society had done wisely in affiliating itself with the RVIA, and he felt sure that the Institute would be pleased to give every help to the younger men."<sup>10</sup> Over the next fifty years, that relationship would be reversed. VASS would, in many respects, urge change, innovation and reinvigoration upon their largely conservative elders, at times even acting as the institute's aesthetic and political conscience.

11. W.B. Griffin, "Architecture in American Universities", transcript of talk given to VASS and discussion afterward, *Journal of the Proceedings of the RVIA*, 11, no. 4 (September 1913): 170-176, 181.

VASS met every first and third Tuesday of the month, where competition designs were discussed, short papers were read by members and lectures were given by experts on various subjects. In 1907, VASS's first year, for example, there were guest lectures by Haddon on 'Arts and Crafts', 'Leaded Lights' by Mr Fisher, and one on heating by George Vincent. In subsequent years, VASS heard talks from John Monash on reinforced concrete (1909), Sydney Wilson on 'American Skyscrapers' (1912), while Mr Mather's lecture 'Notes on the Use of the Pencil' (1909) was cancelled. In 1913, Anketell Henderson lectured to VASS on 'Ornament and Race'. In the same year, Walter Burley Griffin lectured to VASS on 'Architecture in American Universities', after which "The proceedings closed with the toast of Mr and Mrs Griffin and the singing of 'Auld Lang Syne'".<sup>11</sup>

While these evenings suggest sober, respectful events, on other evenings debates were held amongst VASS members. Such topics in 1907 included questions such as what was the 'Best Classical Front in Collins Street', 'Should Skyscrapers be Permitted?', 'Should Verandahs be Affixed to Buildings of Our Principal Streets?' or even more prosaic, 'Are Radiators preferable to all other modes of heating?'. It was clear that the students desired a more vital form of discussion than that offered by the Institute calendar. Combined with social events, the formation of a VASS orchestra, annual 'Blueprint' balls, cricket matches against the RVIA, and tennis days at Lionel San Miguel's home in Mont Albert, it was little wonder that membership of VASS was strong in its early days, and strong enough to feel that it needed and could exercise a voice.

12. "Architectural Education at Melbourne University", *Journal of the Proceedings of the RVIA*, 11, no. 4 (September 1913): 163-166, 206; Arthur S. Williams, "Architecture at the University of Melbourne", *Journal of the Proceedings of the RVIA*, 12, no. 2 (May 1914): 82-84.

VASS became active. It was a force in architectural education pressuring the University of Melbourne in 1913 to introduce a design-based course there and appoint a Chair of Architecture,<sup>12</sup> which ultimately led to the establishment of the Melbourne University Architectural Atelier in 1919 and its building on the university grounds was designed by VASS member Gordon Sutherland.<sup>13</sup> VASS was also the generator of the idea for the RVIA to curate the 'International Architectural Exhibition' at the Allied Societies Trust Building, which was opened on 7 June 1927 by Prime Minister Stanley Bruce, and where more than 400 guests were present to view more than 400 exhibits from across the globe.<sup>14</sup> VASS organized an exhibition of drawings in 1936 at the Demonstration Theatre of the Metropolitan Gas Co. in Flinders Street, Melbourne, which included competition-winning flat-roofed house designs by VASS members W. Lambert Lee and Robert Coxhead,<sup>15</sup> and in 1939, it assisted with stands and exhibits at that year's Home and Building Exhibition. At the same time, VASS activities sometimes made it into the

13. "Opening of the Atelier", *Journal of the Proceedings of the RVIA*, 17, no. 2 (May 1919): 50-51; *Journal of the Proceedings of the RVIA*, 16, no. 5 (November 1918): 158.

14. W.H. Robertson, "The International Architectural Exhibition", *Journal of the Proceedings of the RVIA*, 25, no. 3 (July 1927): 81.

15. "Architectural Students Exhibition", *Journal of the Proceedings of the RVIA*, 34, no. 4 (September 1936): 131.

16. "Architectural Students' Aggressive Policy", *The Age*, December 14, 1931, 8.

17. "Architects Complain: Object to Government Intrusion", *The Age*, July 2, 1938, 16.

18. "Last Night's Dances: Architectural Students", *The Age*, August 31, 1935, 25.

daily newspapers. On 14 December 1931, for example, VASS retiring president Rae Featherstone was reported at the annual meeting as stating "that far too many and too rigid restrictions were being imposed on the students in regard to their studies and awards by the senior members of the profession" and that "Little or nothing had been done for their direct benefit, although in spite of the bad times [the Great Depression] the students had been working for the advancement of the ideals of the profession."<sup>16</sup> By contrast in 1938, notes appeared in the local press of a talk given to VASS by Otto Yuncken, urging young architects not to join the Public Works Department and other government agencies as these "departments carried out work which should rightfully belong to the private practising architects", indicative of a long-term hostility and protectionist stance pursued by the local Victorian profession.<sup>17</sup> In a lighter vein, VASS social activities were regularly reported in the public press, and notably in 1935, when at the annual VASS ball, held that year at The Embassy in Alfred Place, "The famous Egyptian pyramids, the three classic columns, a Gothic arcade, a row of slum tenements and the ultra-modern house all found a place in the impressive pageant presided over by the God of architecture" in a production staged by VASS member, Mary Turner Shaw.<sup>18</sup>

## Publications

Documenting all of these various activities was seen early on by VASS members as important and, as the years went by and as VASS became more confident, one of its most important legacies was a series of publications of diverse format. These were important not just for the privileged social picture they give of what it was like to be a young architecture student or graduate in Melbourne in the first half of the twentieth century, but also how important these publications were as an outlet for the graphic, written and intellectual skills of VASS members. They also show an increasing restlessness and impatience from the early 1930s as students recognised the growing gulf between the conservative nature of their educational institutions and the increasing adoption of modernism worldwide. They also give a sense of how local discourse produced by a younger generation was initially framed within the boundaries of professional etiquette and emulation as if in training for future professional behaviour. They also show when those boundaries were crossed and how productive that might be, a licence permitted to the young that allowed convention and orthodoxy to be challenged: sometimes successfully, sometimes with unintended consequences, leading sometimes to unsatisfying and dramatic denouement.

## An Annual Journal

VASS began discussion of producing an annual journal in 1907 and the first issue appeared in 1908. In style and format, the first twenty years of its publication as the *Journal of Proceedings of the Victorian Architectural Students Society of the RVIA* was marked by it mirroring its parent magazine, the *Journal of Proceedings* of the RVIA: it was a document of record. VASS member Hugh Peck's seal design (1910) of a Doric column was adopted as the main graphic element and also

19. "Presenting 'Victorian Modern'", *Smudges*, 6, no. 46 (July 1947): n.p.

cast as a badge to be worn at meetings. In 1932, the journal evolved and changed its title to become *Lines: a journal of architecture and allied interests*, continuing with this title until 1942, when publication ceased due to the hostilities of World War II. The annual became modern in look and content and the "slim, grim"<sup>19</sup> format of earlier issues was changed: in 1935, for example, *LINES* earned a simulated blueprint cover designed in competition by Robert Coxhead under the editorship of Tom O'Mahoney and Mary Turner Shaw.

Further graphic development came in August 1938 when *Lines* was edited by Roy Simpson and Peter Newell. Its cover, designed by Robin Boyd, featured a dramatic woodblock print of 'LINES' on its side silhouetted onto a green background – paralleled just a month before by Oliver Cox's design for the first issue of *Focus* in July. The 1938 issue of *LINES* opened with a page of quotes from Le Corbusier accompanied by the Ionic capitals now in jaunty woodblock followed by a diverse array of articles, from John Rowell on the Paris Exposition (1937), with accompanying images by Don Ward, Norman Mussen pleading for co-operation with the engineer, American W Newlon Green on modern approaches to landscape architecture, Robin Boyd's humorous piece "Charivari" as well as satirical extracts from *Pencil Points* and *American Architect*. In addition to reportage, quotation reprints and graphic art for the year's Blueprint Ball, irony and satire appear to have been VASS's carefully chosen and consistent tactics to make criticism of the profession.

20. Roy Simpson and Peter Newell, Editorial, *LINES 1939 +1940* (December 1939): 5.

21. "The Artists Embark", 12-13; "Architectural Gallery", 23-26; M. Turner Shaw, "We Went to Smyrna", 29-30; John Barry, "I was a Functionalist", 9-10, 38; Adrian Lawlor, "In the Wake of the Impressionists", 27-28, 39-40; Robin Boyd, "Further Development of the Species: A Vision", 8, in *LINES 1939 +1940* (December 1939).

22. LEA Orton, "Prefabrication", 17-20, 38; Peter Newell, "Bread and Butter Building", 15-16, in *LINES 1939 +1940* (December 1939).

In the 1939 edition of *LINES 1939-40*, the last before hostilities caused publication to cease, with an ominous cover depicting a graveyard of T-squares, editors Simpson and Newell wrote of "war in our time" and "that at the time of writing, it is evident that many of us are serving our country better in smocks than in khaki."<sup>20</sup> As well as the usual humorous articles, there were notes on a talk by textile designer Frances Burke, VASS's contributions to the 1939 Home and Building Exhibition, notes on Molly Turner Shaw's travels through the Gulf of Smyrna, John Barry's article, "I was a Functionalist", an article by art critic Adrian Lawlor titled "In the wake of the Impressionists", and grim reflections on the fate of modern architecture in Europe, especially in the "brave little countries" like Holland, Switzerland and Belgium, whose national pavilions had shown such modernist promise, as well as Robin Boyd's article "Further Development of the Species", predicting a dystopian future six decades for Australia, including Nazi occupation by 2010.<sup>21</sup> More accurate prophetically were Lloyd Orton's article on prefabrication and Peter Newell's "Bread and Butter Building", which argued for the validity and timely idea of a small homes bureau, realised ultimately with the establishment of the RVIA Small Homes Service in 1947.<sup>22</sup> There was also the noting of a new and different publication that had been launched by VASS earlier that year: *Smudges*. As its title suggests, it was very different from *LINES*. Not so much a little magazine but more like a pamphlet, *Smudges* had a very specific agenda:

23. *LINES 1939 +1940* (December 1939): 21.

*Smudges'* policy is twofold: 1. Within the profession, to increase interest in vital Architecture and the somewhat finer arts. 2. To endeavour to improve the general standard of design by the influence of open and unbiased criticism, which is, at present, available from no other source<sup>23</sup>

It was an agenda that would draw the ire of some members of the local profession but the admiration of others locally and internationally.

## Smudges

The first issue of the monthly broadsheet *Smudges* appeared in May 1939. Founding editor was Robin Boyd, who held the position until April 1942 and oversaw the production of 34 issues. *Smudges* was revived by VASS in April 1946 under the editorships of Neil Clerehan (April 1946–January 1949), Walter Gherardin (February 1949–50), Gherardin with Mandy Kelso (March 1950), Kelso (April–May 1950–June 1950) and finally, Helen O'Donnell and Greg Rosman (February 1951–March 1952). Unlike the A4-sized format of *LINES*, *Smudges* was printed double-sided on a single sheet of cheap paper that folded away to fit in a shirt pocket. Its format alone signalled ephemerality and vitality. During Boyd's editorship, the woodblock art was produced by fellow student John Barry with layout and typography by Boyd. Photographs were used sparingly, the first appearing in May 1940. After the war, the graphic format changed but only slightly – Barry's woodblocks were replaced by pen and ink caricatures and greater numbers of photographs, while Boyd's presence continued through his satirical cartoon advertisements for Insulwool.

24. Geoffrey Serle, *Robin Boyd: A Life* (Carlton, Vic.: Miegunyah Press, 1995), 52.

From the outset, Boyd and his fellow committee members who put each issue together,<sup>24</sup> set a challenge to readers and to the profession that had been set in *LINES* in 1937, when they asked whether "Maybe the quietly smug tendencies of the architectural profession and the affectations of so many buildings erected in the name of art are due to just that lack of public criticism". Boyd's first *Smudges* editorial reads like a clarion call to action:

25. Editorial, *Smudges*, 1, no. 1 (May 1939): n.p.

WE longingly await the day when some Great Publication, taking public duty to its heart, will offer regular, informed and utterly frank criticism of all major buildings. Meanwhile, we present these humble comments in all sincerity, and expectantly continue to await the Armageddon when the mysteries of design shall be honestly displayed to a waiting world...then we shall have less occasion to say – "Damn these clients and their bloody bad taste."<sup>25</sup>

26. "Tombs in Toorak", *Smudges*, 1, no. 3 (July 1939): n.p.

27. *Smudges*, 1, no. 9 (December 1939): n.p.

*Smudges*, in its first three years, made critique across all forms of cultural production in Melbourne at the time. Lively film, theatre, art and book reviews accompanied frank reviews of new buildings and issues facing building and construction across Victoria. In "Tombs in Toorak" in July 1939, Boyd lambasted the Bernard Evans-designed "hot-bed of Architectural corruption called Toorak Village", where "Pleasant buildings have been scrapped to make way for the Village idiot... There is no redemption in the most distinguished reproduction in the whole rotten row."<sup>26</sup> But the most eagerly awaited regular features of *Smudges* were the monthly 'Blots' and 'Bouquets', awarded to buildings, people, media outlets and even books. A 'Blot' for example, was given to Melbourne University's Architectural Atelier in December 1939 "for withholding design results of certain students and for the ill-mannered, ill-worded 'confidential circular' sent to them...".<sup>27</sup> In addition to criticisms of



28. "Blot of the Month", *Smudges*, 3, no. 26 (June 1941): n.p.

29. Robin Boyd, "Castle Towers", *Smudges*, 3, no. 30 (November 1941): n.p.

30. "Blot of the Month", *Smudges*, 3, no. 26 (June 1941): n.p.

31. "Bouquet of the Month" and "Blot of the Month", *Smudges*, 10, no. 66 (February 1951): n.p.

32. Jonathan Goh, 'Smudges: The Evolution of a Critical Voice for Modernism in Melbourne 1939-1952', Investigation Project, B.Arch, University of Melbourne, 2004, 11.

33. Neil Clerehan, "Blot of the Month", *Smudges*, 6, no. 43 (April 1947): n.p.

34. "Forum of Events: Lines and Smudges", *Architectural Forum*, 77, no. 2 (August 1942): 6; *Pencil Points*, 23, no. 4 (April 1942): 182.

Warren H. Radford, editor of *TASK*, extract of letter published in the editorial of *Smudges*, 4, no. 34 (April 1942): n.p.

35. Neil Clerehan (ed), *Smudges*, 6, no. 45 (May 1947): n.p.

Moderne-styled buildings, Boyd's special dislike for Tudor and Old English styles reached its zenith when *Smudges'* most notorious 'Blot' was awarded in June 1941 to Arthur Plaisted's castellated Castle Towers flats in South Yarra, which Boyd described as "as bad from a social viewpoint as it is ridiculous from an aesthetic viewpoint...it is as though a giant garbage tin had been shaken over Melbourne... [and] a particularly fruity, juicy hunk.. suddenly became dislodged and fell into the middle of one of the most snobbish retreats in the city."<sup>28</sup> A libel suit ensued and four months later Boyd was forced to publicly apologize. He did so in *Smudges* but, suitably tongue-in-cheek, he titled it in Gothic typeface.<sup>29</sup>

By contrast, 'Bouquets' were given to buildings designed by modernist heroes of the day like Roy Grounds (his Clendon Corner flats had "No fuss, no frills, no feathers"<sup>30</sup>), Geoffrey Mewton, Best Overend, Don Ward and Frederick Romberg, who scored a rare double in 1951, when his Hilstan flats gained a 'Bouquet', while 'Stanhill' flats was given a 'Blot' for, as S. Mcl (Stuart McIntosh) concluded for being "an exaggerated and unorganized jumble" and that "the idea of living in a monumental incubator does not appeal to us."<sup>31</sup> What is evident here is that student aesthetic opinions were not static nor were they unafraid to stir the pot, even in criticising their immediate elders. While certain common features persisted in *Smudges* such as the advocacy for all things modern, subtle shifts in direction occurred with each change of editor. For example, as Jonathan Goh has written, Neil Clerehan's contribution to *Smudges* has been underrated and under-acknowledged.<sup>32</sup> Clerehan continued the themes like the "struggle between private and public enterprise and the battle for prefabrication", and highlighted the immediate post-war concerns of material shortages and building restrictions. He was especially critical of the politics surrounding the 1947 scotching of the steel-framed Beaufort House in favour of the Myer House, which Clerehan gave a 'Blot' and described it as "A seven act, ten square 'prefabricated farce'".<sup>33</sup>

*Smudges* was well-received by students and within the local profession. There was also healthy criticism from architects and interested readers, which the editors were happy to publish. *Smudges* also received international acknowledgment: congratulations from Architectural Forum in August 1942 and the statement that "there has been no American student paper to match these fighting publications" while *Pencil Points* reproduced in full Boyd's article "Death of an Architect" in April 1942.<sup>34</sup> *Smudges* also had its imitators: *Angle*, published in the same folding pocket-sized format by the Sydney MARS group in May 1941 and *TASK*, published from summer 1941 by Harvard GSD students. While visually different in format and size, its editor Warren H. Radford acknowledged the impact made by *Smudges'* on planning *TASK's* content and sharpening its intellectual ambition.<sup>35</sup>

*Smudges* was unique in Australia in the period 1939-52, involving, as students, key figures who would go onto define Australian modern architecture in the 1950s and early 1960s. The list of names is too long but mention alone of James Birrell, Robin Boyd, Peter Burns, David Chancellor, Neil Clerehan, Stuart McIntosh, Peter McIntyre, Peter Newell, Leslie M Perrott Jr and Roy Simpson indicates national impact. There are also names like John Barry, Ronald Bath, Walter Gherardin, Mandy Kelso,

Ron Lyon and Helen O'Donnell whose later careers warrant further study.

## Victorian Modern

36. Neil Clerehan (ed), *Smudges*, 6, no. 45 (May 1947): n.p.

37. Robin Boyd, *Victorian Modern: one hundred and eleven years of modern architecture in Victoria* (Melbourne: Architectural Students Society of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects, 1947).

38. Philip Goad, "Constructing Pedigree: Robin Boyd's 'California-Victoria-New Empiricism' Axis", *Fabrications*, 22, no. 1 (2012): 4-29.

In 1947, *Smudges* editor, Neil Clerehan, announced that VASS's annual journal *Lines* would not appear.<sup>36</sup> In its place VASS would publish a book: Robin Boyd's *Victorian Modern: one hundred and eleven years of modern architecture in Victoria*.<sup>37</sup> It would be the first historical account of the development of modern architecture in Australia. Commissioned by students, it was a venture that allowed Boyd, a former *Smudges* editor and recently appointed director of the RVIA Small Homes Service, free rein to explore his written and graphic skills, as well as craft a proposition for a regionalist modern architecture for Victoria, with his advocacy of the so-called Victorian Type. The idea had been Clerehan's. It was approved by a VASS Committee chaired by Frank Bell and the execution was Boyd's and at the time – globally – it coincided directly with Lewis Mumford's coining of the Bay Region Style and *The Architectural Review's* advocacy of Scandinavian-inspired New Empiricism.<sup>38</sup> For VASS, it was a public relations triumph and *Smudges* proudly proclaimed the book's significance:

39. "Presenting 'Victorian Modern'", *Smudges*, 6, no. 46 (July 1947): n.p.

Victorian Modern is not LINES. It is not a history book, nor a text book, nor a magazine. We believe it is a rather different and entertaining combination. It tells the story in words, photographs and drawings, of the Victorian Building as it has grown... It is not a complete history of every aspect of our mottled architectural past. It is concerned with the thin line of imaginative building that has been carried down to 1947. It tells the story of the architects, the personal story, and the buildings, the objective story. It is not LINES, the annual: it is a book which you will want to keep.<sup>39</sup>

While these disclaimers were honestly admitted, the truth was that Boyd's 'thin line', his carefully crafted argument of Primitives, Pioneers, Opulents, Decadents and Prophets of Victorian architecture, would have remarkable historiographic influence, casting a modernist bias across most Australian architectural histories until the mid-1980s. At the same time, VASS understood the depth of its achievement, announcing unashamedly:

40. "Presenting 'Victorian Modern'", n.p.

The Students' Society believes it is the first students' body to produce any comprehensive work on their future profession. That this is done by the same body that has been accused of dragging that profession in the dust, must surely be taken as a miracle of our times.<sup>40</sup>

## Architecture and Arts

In March 1952, in *Smudges*, which was then edited by Helen O'Donnell and Greg Rosman, VASS member Peter Burns announced the end of the broadsheet in its foldaway form. It was to be replaced by a new publication: a magazine-format of around 24 pages to be edited by Burns, produced bi-monthly and with the new title of *Smudges – ARCHITECTURE AND ARTS*. Burns was clear about the new VASS

venture and the larger readership that was sought:

41. Peter Burns, untitled article, *Smudges*, 11, no. 71 (March 1952): n.p.

It is hoped with the new publication to give to the student, the practitioner and any interested person, a short and concise account of current thought, trends and achievements in the field of art in Australia.

Arts outside architecture are included, for as you are well aware, architecture is the most complete of the arts, and must always have the others in attendance.<sup>41</sup>

42. Paul Hogben, "Architecture and Arts and the Mediation of American Architecture in Post-war Australia", *Fabrications*, 22, no. 1 (2012): 30-57.

In July 1952, the first issue of the new VASS publication appeared. The word *Smudges* had been deleted from the title: it was now simply *Architecture and Arts*. The stylised abstract art-influenced cover design by Burns and the reversed title clearly indicated an intellectual debt to the Los Angeles-based journal *Arts and Architecture*, which as Paul Hogben has written, Burns openly acknowledged.<sup>42</sup> The production team comprised entirely students: Burns was editor, James Birrell, Norman Lehey and Helen O'Donnell were listed as sub-editors, Balwant Saini was the journal's photographer, Andrew McCutcheon handled finance and business, and Amos Rapaport, later one of the founders of Environment-Behaviour Studies (EBS) was in charge of distribution. The first issue delivered a blend of discourse, new work and historical documentation. In addition to a new house by Douglas Alexandra, an article by Ron Rayment on two nineteenth century brick towers (Melbourne's Old Spotting Tower and Coop's Shot Tower), there was the transcript of "A Three Sided Debate: Are we at the beginning, peak or end of an architectural era?", with protagonists, Robin Boyd, Roy Grounds, Frederick Romberg and RG Parker, all then teaching at the University of Melbourne.

The next issues were equally rich in local content and discourse. Articles on furniture designer Clement Meadmore, artist Leonard French, potter Harold Hughan, abstract sculpture, modern textiles and Olympic stadia were matched with ruminations on style by James Birrell, including his competition design for the Australian-American Memorial in Canberra (1949) and his Narrabundah Infants' School (1952), houses by Osborn McCutcheon and David Chancellor, and an article on "People and Planning" by John Bayly. Balwant Saini's cover for the second issue (September 1952) was a brilliant arrangement and photographic study of Meadmore's cord chairs.

43. Peter Burns, c.2002, recounted by Doug Evans. Email correspondence to the author (30 June 2021). See also Doug Evans (ed), *A Hand Passing through Art and Architecture: Peter Burns* (Bulleen, Vic.: Heide Museum of Modern Art, 2004), 5.

44. *Architecture and Arts*, vol. 1, no. 2 (September 1952): n.p.

45. Built Heritage Pty Ltd, 'Kenneth McDonald (1927-1996)', *Dictionary of Unsung Architects*. [https://www.builtheritage.com.au/dua\\_mcdonald.html](https://www.builtheritage.com.au/dua_mcdonald.html) (accessed 4 July 2021).

However, after just five issues, in September 1953 there was an editorial coup. According to Peter Burns, legal pressure was applied and he was forced to resign.<sup>43</sup> Kenneth McDonald (1927-1996), already an architect, had taken on the role of advertising in September 1952<sup>44</sup> and a year later, he ousted Burns and took over as editor. Thereafter VASS ceased its association with *Architecture and Arts*. McDonald edited the journal until 1963 when he sold it to others and the journal finally folded in 1967.<sup>45</sup> Despite its tempestuous beginnings, *Architecture and Arts* served an important and unique role in post-war Australian architectural discourse. It was not affiliated with the RVIA nor an educational institution: it filled a gap, actively fostering a nationwide design culture, albeit becoming largely a commercial venture funded like its Californian predecessor, through advertising and subscription. Significantly, it had come into being through student initiative.

## Afterwords

46. Neil Clerehan, "Housing News from Everywhere", *The Age*, October 7, 1957, 8.

47. *Smudges*, 12, no. 71 (November 1961): n.p. Reference to Vol. 2, no. 4 of *Slate* suggests that, at the very least, two volumes of the news-sheet appeared in 1957 and 1958.

While VASS had arguably burnt its fingers with *Architecture and Arts* and put *Smudges* to bed, another 'little magazine' of an entirely different form appeared a few months later in November 1952. *Cross-Section* (1952-71) was published by the Department of Architecture and Building at the University of Melbourne and edited by Robin Boyd. It continued the drawing-related title line of *Lines and Smudges*, both of which had played off *Pencil Points* (which had disappeared from nomenclature in 1945). Five years later, in October 1957, as a fifty-year anniversary venture, VASS attempted another 'little magazine'. Called *Slate* (1957-9) it appears to have survived for just two years and research to date has not unearthed a single physical copy. Its appearance was noted by Neil Clerehan in the popular press and he referenced an article entitled "The Thirties – A Reassessment" by Hugh Flockhart and the editorial, "We Too are Good" written by young English architect John Bicknell shortly before he returned to England.<sup>46</sup> Recorded too but elsewhere were articles in *Slate* by Don Fulton on architectural education and Philip Sergeant on 'New Brutalism'.<sup>47</sup>

Then, in November 1961, *Smudges* – phoenix-like - reappeared but only for one issue and published not by VASS but by the Melbourne University Architectural Students Club (MUASC). Edited by Peter Corrigan and distributed by Colin Eggleston (who later went into television writing and directing for Crawford Productions, with credits including *Homicide* and *Matlock Police*), this issue of *Smudges* took aim across several fronts. The editorial by 'J. Kennedy' (almost certainly Corrigan writing under the pseudonym of the US President) entitled, "An Agonizing Reappraisal", reflected on *Slate* that:

48. J. Kennedy (Peter Corrigan), "An Agonizing Reappraisal", *Smudges*, 12, no. 71 (November 1961): n.p.

the entire series came to nothing but pedantry and pomposity... *Slate* will be ruefully remembered for the sheer banality of its architectural expression and its wilful failure to promulgate standards of design.<sup>48</sup>

49. Kennedy, "An Agonizing Reappraisal", n.p.

Elsewhere the editorial delivered an historical account of *Smudges*: its formative years under Boyd (1939-41) "awash with enthusiasm and causes", its immediate post-war era when it was edited by "that Laughing Cavalier, Neil Clerehan", which "leaves an Impression of Jewelled Journalism and true militancy", to its 1952 demise at the hands of "Mr Burns' grandiose display of egoism." Corrigan was, in 1961, acutely aware of the historical role which *Smudges* had played in developing criticism in Melbourne. A 'Bouquet' of the decade was awarded to the firm of Grounds, Romberg and Boyd "for their giant contribution to the creation and acceptance of a legitimate public architectural image" and a 'Blot' of the decade to "our Ex-Lord Mayor [Bernard Evans]. Unquestionably his Big Four: Copolov's Shop front; 505 St Kilda Road; Ampol House; Heart's Desire Home, have maimed public taste for at least another twenty-five years." The editorial concluded with a reprint of an extract from *Smudges*' first issue in 1939, whose first line announced that "Criticism is the prerogative and stimulant of Art" and whose last bemoaned that "Maybe the quietly smug tendencies of the profession and the affections of so many buildings erected in the name of art, are due to just that lack of public criticism." With this claim for "HISTORY", Corrigan had formally closed the door on VASS's agenda for discourse.<sup>49</sup>

50. J.M. Freeland, *The Making of a Profession: A History of the Growth and Work of the Architectural Institutes in Australia* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1971), 215. Though the RVIA had been a foundation member of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects since 1929, it was reluctant to renounce its formal status and independence until 1967.

51. "Congress on Architecture", *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 3 1960, 5; "NZ Students for Congress", *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 9, 1960, 21.

52. Further detailed research is required on the genesis and content of these student congresses. A preliminary overview can be found in Byron Kinnaird and Barnaby Bennett, *Congress: Architecture Student Congresses in Australia, New Zealand and PNG 1963-2011* (published online, 2011). See: [http://www.barnabybennett.com/downloads/Freerange/Congress\\_Booklet\\_June2011.pdf](http://www.barnabybennett.com/downloads/Freerange/Congress_Booklet_June2011.pdf) The 1966 Perth congress is one of the best known. See Ken Adam et al, "Education Theme at Students' Convention", *Architecture Today* (June 1966): 5-10 and also Andrew Murray and Leonie Matthews, "Geodesic Domes and Experimental Architectural Education Practices of the 1960s", in P. Hogben and J. O'Callaghan (eds), *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand*, 32, Architecture, Institutions and Change (Sydney: SAHANZ, 2015), 435-445.

According to JM Freeland, VASS was still in existence in 1971<sup>50</sup> but in reality it had all but disappeared by the time of Corrigan's *Smudges* tribute cum public flogging of its 1950s successors in 1961. A key reason for the society's demise was that with increasing student enrolments in architecture state-wide and with a post-war building boom, architectural student clubs were growing within educational institutions and the significance of a student body directly associated with the profession had become diffused and arguably less relevant. Instead, the architecture student clubs located within universities, began to organise student congresses nationally, one of the first being that organized in 1960 by architecture students at the University of New South Wales. Inspired by their visit to a student congress organized in 1959 by architecture students at the University of Auckland, the UNSW students reciprocated with a conference in August 1960 with the theme of 'The Quest for Ideals' and invited other students from interstate.<sup>51</sup> Shortly afterward around 1962, the Australasian Architectural Students Association (AASA) was formed and important student congresses were held in Australia and New Zealand between 1963 and 1971 with focus on topics such as the social aspects of housing (Auckland, 1963), low-cost housing (Sydney, 1964), education (Perth, 1966) and environment (Auckland, 1971), with invited speakers including Aldo van Eyck, R. Buckminster Fuller, Cedric Price, Sim van der Ryn amongst a host of others.<sup>52</sup> It was not until 1998, that an institute-sponsored student society re-emerged with the establishment of SONA (Student Organized Network for Architecture).

The charting of the publication activities of VASS between 1907 and 1961 can be seen as a special moment in Australian architectural history, where the profession gave its blessing to younger members to actively develop a culture specifically directed towards fostering the parent organization's future existence. That the history of VASS overlaps with the increasing formalization of architectural education in Victoria, the increasing regulation and institutionalization of the profession with registration in 1923, and the reluctance of the RVIA to join federally with other state-based institutes (only renouncing its status and coming under the umbrella of the RAIA as a state chapter in 1967) is no accident. The demise of VASS also needs to be seen against the exponential growth of student numbers after World War II and a pan-Australasian wish for students to come together and talk about their discipline and resist being bound by the jurisdictions of the profession. It suggests that the impetus for and the basis for discourse is complex, but ultimately rooted in the institutional framings – social, legal, educational and intellectual – that continue to govern the discipline of architecture.