Robin Boyd and the Quotation

Translating Public Words to Public Building

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Abstract

The work of the Australian architect and public intellectual Robin Boyd includes architecture, exhibition designs, multi-media presentations and of course an extensive list of publications and writings. Boyd produced work as an architectural historian, polemicist and practitioner. As a writer and also an architect, as Philip Goad has suggested, Boyd was like a Bower Bird, collecting and cobbling together elements from different sources. By beginning to develop a framework that positions and locates Boyd's written works alongside his projects we gain a greater understanding of the connection between his architectural designs and his writing. While many historians have focused on Boyd's earlier house designs, his later public works and writings deserve greater interrogation. This research establishes the extent to which Boyd used architectural quotation, how these quotations were presented and structured in his written work and how they informed his built work. The research adopts a framework focused on a discursive analysis of Boyd's journal articles and books of the 1960s to his death in 1971 that are chronologically mapped to his public building projects during this time. This analysis reveals how Boyd's works and writings from 1960-1967 depict a relatively consistent commitment to a universal modernism tempered through a regional lense. On the other hand. Boyd's later writings and works from 1968 through to his death in 1971, diverge into a less coherant and fragmented body of work. This trajectory illustrates the degree to which Boyd's Modernist Universalism changed over the course of the 1960s, his last works expressing a crisis and bewilderment in Boyd's thoughts about modernist architecture. As we demonstrate, this also echoes the degree to which Modernist Universalism changed over the course of the 1960s as it entered into Post Modernist tendencies.

The 1960s and Boyd

Robin Boyd was witness to the unprecedented changes and developments in the global architectural system during the 1960s. It has been argued that Boyd's writings for international magazines "placed him on equal terms" with other architectural critics across the globe. What is of interest is not so much Boyd's style or approach to writing, his credentials as a historian, polemicist or as a critic, but beginning to disentangle the relationship between Boyd's writings and his work as an architect. His writings and projects must be considered in the context of the vortex of the 1960s. Following the demise of CIAM and the last conference at Otterloo, the modern movement came to be questioned in a number of different ways. Firstly, there was revisionism that had arisen out of CIAM itself as exemplified by the work of Team X and exemplified in the work of the Smithsons. Secondly, there was an emergence of new critiques questioning modernist urbanism and the structuring of the post war city, both in the new world and Europe: Jane Jacobs' Life and Death of American Cities was published in 1961 and Aldo Rossi's Architecture of the City was first published in Italian in 1966, Robert Venturi's Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture was also published in 1996. As well as the efforts to revise modernism in the aftermath of CIAM, tumult was fostered by more extreme polemical experiments in both Europe, Britain and Japan: The work of the Groupe International d'Architecture Prospective (GIAP) in France, Archigram in Britain, and the work of extreme figures such as Constant are just a few examples. Finally, there was also, what Tafuri would call, an archaeological and nostalgic mining of history exemplified in the Italian Neo-Liberty movement, Louis Kahn and even in the constructivist allusions of James Stirling. Thrown into this cocktail of polemics, experiment and urban propaganda was the way that technology, chiefly those technologies, that arose out of aerospace and the military industrial complex, speed into popular culture and then appeared to capture the imagination of architects. The final culmination of the decade at Osaka 1970 appears to pay witness to this.

By beginning to develop a framework that positions and locates Boyd's written works alongside his projects we gain a picture of Boyd within the above context. This picture is less tainted by the mythologies that surround and seem to beleaguer his reception as a public intellectual. The Boyd Archive at the State Library of Victoria is relatively large and contains drawings of projects, written materials, multi-media and even a few objects. What can we learn from his writings and how this manifested in his built work? In order to untangle and make sense of Boyd's output and the relationship between his writings and his design work as an architect we have employed three sources of information. These include the Avery Architectural Index which appears to accurately list Boyd's journal publications, a catalogue list of Boyd's book publications alongside a chronological list of Boyd's architectural projects during the 1960s. This latter list is based on the Boyd's archival material at the State Library of Victoria and builds on our previous work.

Boyd's writings

There are a number of characteristics of Boyd's writings that should be noted prior to mapping these writings to his architectural projects. Firstly, as Tibbitts was to note in 1972, Boyd's activities as a

writer, and indeed an architectural historian, as being secondary to Boyd's passion to be an architect. These different aspects of Boyd's work is both intriguing and seemingly perplexing to those who have sought to understand his legacy. For the most part, the intertwined nature of his architectural work, public utterances and writings enabled Boyd to draw from a large pool of interests and influences that he quoted from in different ways across all aspects of his work. This has made it relatively easy for different people to read and retell Boyd in different ways. Boyd is often seen as a cipher for many things in both Australian culture and as an architect embedded in the modern movement of the 1950s and 1960s. But what is significant in Tibbits above comment is the fact that he regards Boyd as a fellow architectural historian.

Secondly, Philip Goad has characterised the primary streams in Boyd's oeuvre to his activities as a both a pamphleteer and a kind of frontier architect. An architect who in Goad's words often "created a fictional future and began a habit of speculation that was to flavour his writing for the next thirty years". 2 In a survey of Boyd's writings, Goad has argued that the two themes that characterise Boyd's style of writing are pamphlet and frontiers. For Goad, Boyd's writings had a base in the pamphlets as a student as well as the fictional and speculative frontiers that he produced as a student. Goad's essay is contained in the catalogue to Robin Boyd the architect as critic, an exhibition curated by Harriet Edquist, Karen Burns and Philip Goad in 1989. The exhibition and the associate publication brought together writings by Boyd in chronological order. It is an extensive chronology and includes books, periodical and newspaper articles, letters, broadcasts as well as notices, and ancillary information regarding Boyd's work with various Associations and Committees. The catalogue to the exhibition also provides a chronological list of references related to Boyd's specific buildings and projects. This is a reference list of each project and its subsequent publication either authored by Boyd himself or by other critics, architects or commentators. For example, Menzies College designed and documented in 1965 has seven listings. This includes Boyd's own publication for the college in Living in Australia and a number of articles that appear to discuss the college after Boyd's passing.³

Once Boyd's publications and his non-domestic public works are compiled together in chronological order a number of patterns emerge. After a flurry of journal publications in *Architectural Record* and *Architectural Review* in the late mid to late 1950s, it can be seen that a number of Boyd's publications well represent Boyd's position during the 1960s. These include *Kenzo Tange* published in October 1962 and appears to have preceded the second edition of the *Australian Ugliness* which was published sometime in 1962. *Puzzle of Architecture* was written in 1963 and 1964 and published in 1965 and *New Directions in Japanese Architecture* was published in 1968. It is clear from these written projects, as set out in the discussion below that his overall position in relation to modern architecture, had coalesced at this time. Boyd had begun to find solutions to the problems he flagged in *The Australian Ugliness*, within modern Japanese architecture, and many of Boyd's built works quoted these sources.

Boyd's notable public commissions between 1960 and 1967 (with corresponding start dates from the SLV register) included, Tower Hill (May 1961), Jimmy Watsons, (May 1961) Work for Wittners (May 1961), The ANU Zoology Building (May 1961), John Batman Motor Inn (May 1962), Balzac Restaurant (Mar 1963) Erin Street Medical centre (Mar 63), Work for Lend Lease at Apple Tree Hill Estate (Mar 63), McCaughey Court (1965), the President Motor Inn (Jul 65), Menzies College (Jul 65), the work for Expo 67(Aug 65) and the Lend Lease Castle Hill Subdivision (Aug 65).



Figure 2. Menzies College, a residential building at La Trobe University, Bundoora, Victoria, designed by Robin Boyd, completed in 1970, photographed by Mark Strizic. (State Library of Victoria, Image H2011.55/1581).

Tange

Boyd's discovery of Japanese modernism through his own travels there, and particularly Kenzo Tange's work, was a revelation. As documented in his book on Tange titled *Kenzo Tange* and published in 1962, Boyd was captivated by Tange's ability to create functional buildings that were also beautiful. He was drawn to Tange's ability to be both international yet local. "Although Tange is Japanese" Boyd wrote, "he is also an architect of the world... Yet he is also a regionalist..." Tange, he noted, "is an authority on Japanese traditions who knows and respects the traditional forms enough to want to avoid counterfeiting them". Well ahead of Kenneth Framption's call for a critical regionalism in 1983, Boyd's sentiment reflects his rejection of an 'International Style' put forward by the early founders of European modernism, in favour of a modern architecture that also draws on local traditions.

The Puzzle of Architecture

Writing in the *Puzzle of Architecture* in 1965 Boyd was to proclaim that by 1960 "the old European Masters of modern design were decisively dethroned and utter anarchy ruled in the world of architecture". Yet despite this, Boyd also hoped that "I think it is just possible in the chaos a hint of the form of that evolution of modern architecture is taking, and despite much visual evidence to the contrary I believe that the form is essentially good". He went on to write "I see a discipline returning to

modern architecture, and a regrowth of artistic and intellectual convictions after a rather silly season, and thus a return to a worthwhile cause and more good conflict".⁸

The book itself is introduced with a section called 'Problems', followed by a section entitled Revolution, Counter-Revolution and finally a section called Solutions. The *Puzzle of Architecture* indicates Boyd's approach to understanding the history of modern architecture. This is achieved through a segmentation of phases introduced in the first section on Problems. The first phase Boyd characterised as one that had "evolved comparatively gently". In this phase he cited a number of examples of the "glass box" international style including: Lever House, Mies van der Rohe's Lake Shore Drive and in Melbourne, I.C.I House. Boyd goes on to argue that the second phase of modernism emerged in the late 1950s as a response to the banalities of the glass box. He claimed that for architects the "impersonal, machine-like universality, no longer held any magic" for architects. Interestingly he notes at this time there was a "spectacular increase in the number of personal expressions and imaginative shapes and personality cults around new star architects". Boyd appears to bemoan the explosion of "everyone his own avant-garde", "plastic forms" and "ornamentation" in "new guises" leading to a "a new leaderless rabble of styles" Boyd finishes this first section on problems by proposing that architecture must avoid idiosyncratic individual solutions.

The second section of the *Puzzle of Architecture* is a historical narrative centred on the rise and fall of functionalism across these two phases of modern architecture. Boyd argues strongly for the merits of functionalism which he saw as having "some spare of eternal truth and validity". In setting out this history Boyd argues that "the ethics and techniques of Functionalism were still capable of being developed into a wide range of characters". For Boyd, functionalism was "an ethical rule and a technique of design, not some sort of mood or atmosphere". At the end of this section Boyd laments that the architectural "revolution" instigated but the first generation of modern architects and ended, in part because of "the cutting of the moral or functionalist anchor". In a historical narrative centred on the rise and fall of functionalism and the first generation of the section of the section below the first generation of modern architects and ended, in part because of "the cutting of the moral or functionalist anchor".

Boyd then goes to discuss this counter revolution against the international style. The central theme in this section is the concept of shapes which then leads into a discussion of engineering innovation and tensile structures. This is illustrated with numerous examples. Edward Durrell Stone's U.S Embassy in New Delhi, Yamaski's World Trade Centre and Sarinnen's T.W.A terminal amongst others were cited. Again Boyd returns to the theme of orthodoxy and transgression in relation to modern archiecture's recent history. He states that a "world in which every building was an exciting shape designed by a Candela or a Saarinen at the high pitches of their respective imaginations would surely be acceptable to very few people". With reference to Saarinenn's TWA terminal Boyd sees these kinds of efforts as a failure concluding the section by arguing that "Architecture began to tire of so many pretty things, so many stunning effects". 16

In the final section of the book Boyd refers to a 'third phase' of modern architecture; 'the last evolutionary phase of twentieth-century architecture'. ¹⁷ This is a phase that Boyd himself obviousy

identifies with. For Boyd this third phase is evident in the work of architects such as later Corbusier, Kahn, Louis Sert and Tange and exemplified in the projects such as Rudolph's Yale architecture and art building, Tange's Yamanishi Press Centre as well as Sea Ranch by MLTW in California.

It is this third phase, articulated in *The Puzzle of Architecture*, which best represents Boyd's position up to around 1968. It is a postion in accord with Boyd's remarks that good architecture should be the result of a balanced and realistic approach that reconciles "the undoubted attractions of the medley beautiful to the deep-seated need for a sense of reality in this great servant art". ¹⁸ Using a characteristic dialectical argument, he posits that the heart of the puzzle is a "moral question" one that is dilemma concerning "rational against emotional design, intellectual against visual beauty, of appropriate against irrelevant images, of reality against romance". ¹⁹ It this style of rhetorical argument that allows Boyd to put together seemingly disparate, quoted and fragmented architectural phenomena.

Boyd's approach to architecture in his career, up to 1968, read through his writings, is stable, balanced and yet reformist. He is not interested in capricious experiment, or an abandonment of modernist principles for its own sake. Consolidated around demarcated phases and binary dichotomies Boyd's architectural morality appears to support the notion that he is an arbiter of taste. As argued below in relation to *New Directions in Japanese Architecture* his overall position is certainly a subscription to the idea of a reasoned universal modernism tempered by regional inflections. Designed in 1965, Menzies College, his most substantial project of the 1960s, exemplifies Boyd's stable and polemical position at that point in time. Neither the first unbuilt scheme, or the completed second scheme for Menzies, can be seen as being discordant from what Boyd himself describes as the third phase of modern architecture.

New Directions in Japanese Architecture

From *New Directions in Japanese Architecture* onwards, Boyd's position and his subscription to a regional universal modernism appears to fragment and dissipate. Certainly the distinction between what Boyd would later describe as Antiarchitecture and Architecture, was not yet obvious in his publications, up to, *New Directions in Japanese Architecture*, first published in 1968. But there are some discordant notes written in it. On the one hand, *New Directions* celebrated the way in which modern Japanese architecture expressed a truth to materials and structural expression, just like Boyd's early residential works, but on the other hand, put forward the future visions of the Japanese Metabolism movement, an antiarchitecture of systems, which Boyd claimed grew out of a "space psychosis". Certainly Boyd's 1969-71 unbuilt design for the Carnich Development for apartments in East Melbourne quotes the work of the Japanese Metabolists with its tree like structure. ²⁰ In contrast, Boyd's design for Menzies College completed in 1970, is a more subtle fusion of Japanese influences and more in line with Boyd's Architecture notion. It is worth noting also that Boyd's *New Directions in Japanese Architecture* was published just two years after Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. While Boyd's quoting of many sources across all aspects of his work

was often less literal than Venturi's later approach, Boyd's book does reveal a similar affection to Venturi in embracing the contradictions of synthesizing the new with the old. In it, Boyd revealed his contempt for the ideologies of early European modernism that rejected the past. He argued that the "contrasts between the traditional and the modern do not result from an avant-garde movement oblivious to the past, as a Western one may be. On the contrary, almost every modern Japanese shows his awareness of tradition and his deliberate attempt to rid himself of shallow imitation of it". ²¹



Figure 3 (left). Carnich Development for apartments in East Melbourne, (Robin Boyd Foundation). **Figure 4 (right).** Menzies College, a residential building at La Trobe University, Bundoora, Victoria, designed by Robin Boyd, completed in 1970, photographed by Mark Strizic. (State Library of Victoria, Image H2011.55/1535).

Architecture or Anti-Architecture

While the *Puzzle of Architecture* may have reflected for Boyd the hope that modern architecture itself would remain ascendant by the late 1960s, it appears that Boyd himself was struggling to defend the universal modernism that he had subscribed to up to 1965. This is evident in his work from the years 1965 onwards as the 1960s rolled on. Arguably, Menzies College was Boyd's most, and last, cohesive architectural work to reflect his efforts to construct a Universal Modernism.

After 1968, Boyd's projects arguably appear to contain discordant notes and experiments that appear to question his own position. In some of these projects it appears that Boyd's tendency to be frontiersman and a futurist has got the better of him. This is evident in a number of his public projects from this time onwards unitl his untimely death. Chief amongst these is the Expo 70 Space Tube whose resemblance to the futuristic diagrams Archigram suggests a formalist and expressionistic experiment outside of the bounds of a cohesive universal modernism. Whilst the Space Tube was arguably a polemical project produced for the Exposition, other projects after this point in time also seem to disregard the "third leg" of appearance in what Boyd called the Vitruvian tripod of "strength, utility and appearance".

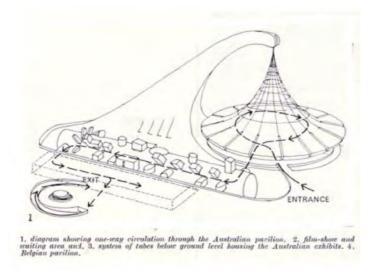


Figure 5. Expo 70 Space Tube, Robin Boyd, 1970 (https://peterraisbeck.com/2016/04/26/was-robin-boyd-on-acid-the-multi-media-space-tube-at-expo-70/).

This reference to Vitruvius and the unfolding developments of the 1960s was addressed in Boyd's 1969 essay for *Architectural Forum* entitled 'Antiarchitecture'. It is worth reiterating Boyd's comments in this essay again. As with much of the writing and the argument posited, in the *Puzzle of Architecture*, Boyd put the case in binary terms arguing that architects have a choice between "Architecture and anti-architecture". For Boyd Antiarchitecture was "opposed to visible concepts, design and order" it was interested in:

The population explosion and plugging-in and pop, by McLuhan, of course, and by systems and electronics; and it yearns for the day when it will be able to surrender itself entirely to the computer. All this lead to a concentration on open-ended planning, subdivision of elements, changeability, even portability. But these qualities are found in a lot of advanced architecture.... Antiarchitecture goes further. It is compulsively opposed to visible concepts, design and order. It wants to...smash open the core of architecture and find something absolutely different inside. Its credo goes something like this: burn, form burn....²⁴

In a number of later projects Boyd appears to produce conceptual designs which highlight the iconicity of quoted fragments rather than trying to produce an integrated concept. Neptune's Fishbowl is a good example. It is a project that appears to indicate an abandonment of the principles espoused by Boyd earlier in the decade. This was an iconic geodesic dome reminiscent of Buckminster Fuller but via its use of integrated advertising signage it also appears to allude to the iconicity of Venturi, Scott Brown's *Learning from Las Vegas* published after Boyd's death in 1972. Similarly, the prototype for the Golden Fleece service station appears, with its folded, and perhaps tensile, roof structure to directly quote the work of Candelas. The project for the Mitchelton Winery also appears to depart from or at least be an evolution, of Boyd's position. This is because the project sees to be an expression of

fragmentation rather an attempt to produce an integrated image. Churchill House designed in 1968 and 1969 also appears to show Boyd's experimental bent and abandonment of an integrated and universal modernism. Again this plays on a dichotomy of forms but there appears to be no effort to integrate or reconcile these forms together. Each façade has a different compositional treatment. In addition, a sloping glass box sits on top of the buildings plinth. Heritage architects have assigned the Churchill build with the label of "New Brutalism". Yet Boyd would probably reject this given his article announcing the end of New Brutalism published in Architectural Review in 1967. ²⁵



Figure 6. Neptune's Fish Bowl designed by Robin Boyd, (https://au.pinterest.com/pin/531706299729377715/).

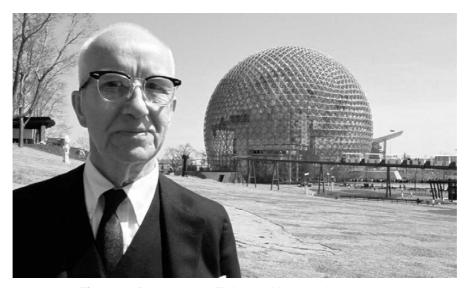


Figure 7. Buckminster Fuller and his geodesic dome, (https://alchetron.com/Buckminster-Fuller-1301929-W).

In Boyd's writings about architecture during most of the 1960s we can see an architectural critic and historian who draws on a wide, and quoted, knowledge of architectural precedents and material. Boyd's range of cultural knowledge from outside architecture is evident, for example, in the design for the various scientific and educational displays in the Space Tube which he designed and built for the

Osaka Expo in 1970. As a tastemaker, Boyd's collecting spanned both popular, social and architectural culture. He was also certainly aware of other cultural and social phenomena as they emerged in both in Australian society and elsewhere. As suggested at the outset of this paper this has led to much mythologising on the part of numerous social commentators.

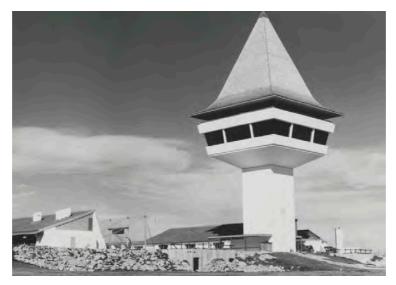


Figure 7. Robin Boyd's design for the Mitchelton Winery, photographed by John T Collins, (State Library of Victoria, Image H98.250/467).

After 1968 there is obvious evidence of a shift in Boyd's architectural work that appears to question Boyd's position in relation to his promotion of the "third phase" identified in the *Puzzle of Architecture*. Up to this time, he brought together and quoted the seemingly disparate elements of his architectural knowledge: his knowledge of Australian architecture, his work in Japan centred on Tange, his curiosity with the young Metabolists, his interests in tensile structures and construction. These elements where bought together in his architectural work in an attempt to give credence to universal modernism with a reasoned regional inflection. After 1968 Boyd himself was himself no longer one of the "coming men". After this time his work taken as a whole, the Space Tube, Churchill House, The Carnich Towers, Mitchelton and small projects such as the Fishbowl point to experiment and a fragmentation. There is no overt realism in order to make a unity in these works. Some of these projects are overtly formalist and appear to embrace the very irrelevancies that Boyd's work eschewed earlier in the decade. This shift may have a number of explanations. Boyd may himself have been questioning the "third phase" of modernism through experiment and "antiarchitecture". He may also have been bewildered by the architectural tumult of the 1960s and no longer confident in his own ability to taste-make. Or he may have been himself smashing open "the core of architecture" to himself participate in the "burn form burn" credo. At the least his later work of the 1960s can be seen as a search for his own way of doing things; by a mid-career architect who could not simply latch onto the next architectural thing. His untimely death and an incomplete career make it hard to know which of these explanations may have emerged more distinctly if he had lived.

Conclusion

Alongside Boyd's evident knowledge as a tastemaker, there is a sense in the very late projects that the integration of diverse fragments was being eschewed in favour of a celebration of the fragment rather than the whole. There also appears to be an emergence of an interest in irony and the semantic turn evident in the work of Venturi Scott Brown. This reflects Boyd's own search and experiments as an architect attempting to develop his own language of architecture. But it may also suggest an attraction to the tumult of the 1960s alongside dissatisfaction with his own milieu of Australian architecture. Writing to Paul Hopkin's in Japan on the 7th of May 1968 regarding the photographs for *New Direction*, Boyd was to exclaim, "In this land where architecture is so sterile of ideas I love the Japanese high spirit'.

Our purpose here has not been to adopt a complete and holistic picture of Boyd and his writings and projects; our purpose has been to develop a framework, through the chronological assembly of diverse material without recourse to reinforcing a Boyd mythology. Given the diverse materials in the Boyd archive as well as the many architectural commissions he undertook this work is ongoing.

Endnotes

¹ Philip Goad. Pamphlets at the Frontier in Burns. K, Edquist. H, Goad, P. (eds) Robin Boyd: the architect as critic. Melbourne: Transition, (1989) p.13.

² Pamphlets at the Frontier p.14.

³ Karen Burns, Harriett Edquist and Philip Goad (eds). Robin Boyd: the architect as critic. Melbourne: Transition, 1989 p.74.

GRB Archive, State Library of Victoria.

⁵ Robin Boyd, *Kenzo Tange*, (New York: George Braziller, 1972), 12.

⁶ Boyd, Kenzo Tange, p.12.

Robin Boyd, The Puzzle of Architecture, (Parkville: Melbourne University Press, 1965) 2.

⁸ Boyd, *The Puzzle of Architecture*, 3.

Boyd, The Puzzle of Architecture, 17.

¹⁰ Boyd, The Puzzle of Architecture, 17.

¹¹ Boyd, The Puzzle of Architecture, 70.

¹² Boyd, *The Puzzle of Architecture*, 76.

¹³ Boyd, The Puzzle of Architecture, 70.

¹⁴ Boyd, The Puzzle of Architecture, 77.

¹⁵ Boyd, The Puzzle of Architecture, 105.

¹⁶ Boyd, The Puzzle of Architecture, 127

¹⁷ Boyd, The Puzzle of Architecture, 155

¹⁸ Boyd, *The Puzzle of Architecture*, 163.

¹⁹ Boyd, The Puzzle of Architecture, 162.

²⁰ Christine Phillips and Dr. Peter Raisbeck, 'Contesting Brutalism in Australia: Robin Boyd and the dissemination of Brutalism' in Contested Terrains: Society of Architectural Historians Australia & New

Zealand, Freemantle, 2006.

²¹ Robin Boyd, *New Directions in Japanese Architecture*, (New York: George Braziller, 1968), 7. ²² Raisbeck, Peter, and Simon Wollan. "Boyd as "Bower Bird": Robin Boyd's Space Tube and the Global Avant-garde' ". In Progress: The Proceedings of the Twentieth Annual Conference of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand, Sydney, Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand, vol. 253. 2003.

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Robin Boyd Antiarchitecture. Architectural forum, 1968 Nov., v. 129, n. 4, 84-85.

²⁵ Robin Boyd The sad end of new brutalism. *Architectural Review*, 1967 July, v. 142, 9-11.