

**NATIONAL TRUST OF AUSTRALIA (VICTORIA)
CLASSIFICATION REPORT**

NAME: Bell/Bremer House by Guilford Bell
LOCATION: 90 Caroline Street, South Yarra, Victoria, 3141
FILE NO: B5639

STATEMENT OF CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE:

What is significant?

Described as a long linear 'garden pavilion', the Bell/Bremer house was designed by Guilford Bell. It was designed to his personal brief and was built in 1976 by Bell's own company as a project to be sold. The house and surrounding courtyard gardens sit harmoniously within the east/west rectangular site, and are hidden from the street behind a garage and garden wall. The building is single storey, constructed, unusually for Bell, from second hand face bricks (now painted white), and with a flat roof. Bell's extensive use of floor to ceiling glazing, particularly along the northern façade, and the south side of the living area facilitates the uninterrupted visual interaction of internal and external space and extends the limits of the house. The glazing, along with a shading pergola on the north side and the use of plants and deciduous trees, helps to regulate solar gain throughout the year.

The plan of the house follows the shape of the site and is simple, narrow and linear with enclosed private spaces at both ends and an open living/dining area in the middle. On the northern side a four metre wide garden stretches the length of the house and there is a small courtyard garden at the front enclosed behind the garden wall. Natural materials are a feature of the house with cedar boarded walls and living room ceiling, and floors of square, pink toned quarry tiles. The house is in good condition with only minor changes to facilities. The garage was a later addition replacing what was presumably an open car port.

How is it significant?

The Bell/Bremer House is of architectural significance at the State level.

Why is it significant?

The Bell/Bremer house is unique in Bell's architectural career. It is the only house conceived and completed by Bell without the constraint of a commissioning client. Although modest in size, it encapsulates many of the signature themes and modernist design principles that he had evolved and refined over the many years of his architectural practice.

Architecturally the Bell/Bremer House is an extraordinary work. It incorporates a series of restrained but powerful minimal gestures to create an environment of streamlined simplicity. The house and grounds flow together in a manner which incorporates the whole site as an integral part of the architectural concept. Within the



5th October 2010

F.N: B5639

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Dear Sir/Madam

**RE: National Trust Classification of Bell/Bremer House
90 Caroline Street, SOUTH YARRA, 3141 Classified: State**

I write to inform you that the above property has been classified by the National Trust, which is an independent membership organisation committed to the conservation of Victoria's heritage. We have identified this property as having special historic and aesthetic qualities and believe that it is an important part of our cultural heritage that should be preserved for the education and appreciation of future generations. A report explaining the reasons for this Classification is attached.

Please be aware that the inclusion of a property in the National Trust Register does not impose any legal obligations on property owners. The Trust is not a government body, and has no legislative power. However, most properties classified by the Trust are also recognised as important historic items by the local municipality.

If this property is considered significant at the State level, it may be registered by Heritage Victoria, which is a state government body and permits would be required from them for any significant alterations or demolition.

We would like to request that you place this letter on the appropriate file, with the intention that the Trust be informed should Council become aware of any proposed developments that could have an adverse impact on the above mentioned property.

If you have any queries regarding this classification please contact Ann Gibson of this office on 9656 9818.

Yours sincerely

**Mr Paul Roser
Conservation Manager**

CC. **The Owner
Prahran Historical Society
Anstat
Vic Roads**

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plan Bell uses a technique of compression and release to regulate the design of public and private space. The sophisticated control of light and shade and the subtle use of earth tones together with the contrast of solidity and transparency all add to the visual success of the house.

Situated in South Yarra where Bell spent thirty years living and working, the Bell/Bremer house is important as a clear expression of his personal design concepts on a small scale.

EXTENT:

The entire building, boundary and courtyard walls, paving and landscape elements.

CATEGORY: Private House

HISTORY:

Built in 1976 by Bell's construction company Caroline Investments Pty. Ltd., the professional requirement of the time required the house to be sold. Bought by David Bremer, it was sold four years later to Mrs Abrahams, then subsequently to Gerard De Preu who sold the property in 2007. It was then purchased by the neighbours adjoining the property at the rear, Michael and Sally Anne Hayes (Michael is the son of David Hayes the well-known horse trainer), for their use as a 'pleasure' pavilion and garden extension.

Bell's life partner, Dennis, continues to live next door at 92 Caroline Street and Bell's business partner, Graham Fisher, resides at 94 Caroline Street. In 2007 both parties considered buying the property to protect it against insensitive development but were persuaded by the Hayes that their commitment to retain the property as originally designed was genuine.

The Architect – Guilford Marsh Bell 1912–1992

Guilford Bell grew up at Camboon, a large Queensland grazing property which as well as fostering his love of the Australian landscape allowed him to develop at an early age a 'unique approach to modern design' that was 'different from that of his contemporaries'.

Paul Carter in *The Road to Botany Bay* describes the Australian preoccupation with the desire to create an 'intimate charm' with the environment as the need to establish familiarity within the boundless and foreign landscape. Most of Bell's works exhibit this desire to put the human figure as the central focus within a highly controlled, articulated cultivated 'space of intimacy' (Van Schaik (Ed.) 1999).

Bell was educated at boarding school, and then had an initial period of training in the architectural offices of Lange Powell in Brisbane whilst attending evening classes at the Queensland Institute of Technology. Uninterested in following the family's rural tradition, he was encouraged by his father to travel to London to study architecture. He enrolled in the Bartlett School of Architecture at London University in the early 1930s. At that time, the emerging Modernism was largely confined to Europe, and had not penetrated the English architecture schools.

From 1936–39 Bell worked in the London office of the 'highly reactionary' architect and architectural schools principal, Professor Albert Richardson. Whilst rejecting

Richardson's historicism, Bell admired his meticulous attention to detail, and, also caught from him 'his enthusiasm for classical values in architecture'. These values of order and symmetry are evident in his architecture. Although Bell espoused the modern movement in design, Joseph Burke in his foreword to *1952-1980*

Architecture of Guilford Bell, describes him as follows:

He has a profound love of the classical. A classical artist seeks to attain an impersonal style of perfection and total order. At the same time he retains a personal style or character of his own. (Burke in Imrie Ed., 1982, p.10)

Whilst working in London, Bell became friendly with the author Agatha Christie and accompanied her and her husband, the archaeologist Max Mallowan, on visits to sites in Syria. He acted as architect to the expeditions and formed an interest in the architecture of the east. Bell's first commission was to restore a vast Georgian house for Agatha Christie and to bring it back to its original concept, 'pure in form and detail'.

Bell returned to Australia and served in the RAAF during WW11. He joined the Ansett organisation and in 1948 accompanied businessman Reg Ansett on a trip to the USA. This resulted in his commission to design the Hayman Island Resort Hotel in 1949. From 1952 onwards he engaged in private practice mainly designing domestic architecture for clients with whom he had a close personal relationship. A notable exception from domestic architecture was the design for the Felt and Textile Offices, (1959) in Melbourne (now demolished). Bell designed a building which 'though small in area, was as tall as building regulations would allow' with an intricate web of 'its aluminium curtain and the alternate panels of white Vitrolite and glass' (Burke in Imrie Ed., 1982, p.9).

Guilford Bell practised architecture in Melbourne for forty years establishing his own personal and identifiable style. He worked mainly on the design of individual client commissioned houses in both Victoria and New South Wales. Many of these houses are classified as of State significance for architectural value by the National Trust: Bardas House, South Yarra (1958); Fairfax Pavilion, Bowral NSW (1969); Seccull House, Brighton (1972); Willy House, Toorak (1972); Grant House, Officer (1986). In 1963 the Simon House at Mount Eliza received the Victorian Architecture Medal and in 1981 he was awarded an OBE for his work on the Official Establishments Trust.

In 1982 he published a beautifully designed treatise on his work to that date (*1952-1980 Architecture of Guilford Bell*, Proteus, 1982). Professor Emeritus Sir Joseph Burke wrote the foreword and in his learned lines the background of many Bell buildings was elegantly delineated. His houses often consisted of symmetrical groups of rooms arranged around courts or facing dramatic views. Walls were sparingly pierced or completely glazed. The houses were invariably white, ineffably stark with suggestions of classical proportions in an unmistakably modernist idiom.

Bell has been quoted as admiring the work of Mexican architect Luis Barragan and also Philip Johnson. He admired architects who practised the 'Art of Architecture' rather than the 'Business of Architecture'. Between 1961 and 1964 Bell was in partnership with Neil Clerehan. This was short lived mainly due to the forcefulness of Bell's character. Bell formed a partnership in 1985 with the architect, Graham Fisher, who continues the architectural practice to date.

Guilford Bell never sought professional acclamation. He had little contact with his peers or the organised profession. He was virtually unknown to the younger generation of architects

although his classical, symmetrical buildings struck a chord with the reawakening interest in Neo-Classicism in the 1980s. Like so many long term artists he had the mixed blessing of being re-evaluated later in his career by a new generation with new values (Clerahan, 'Guilford Marsh Bell' obituary, *Transition* 38, 1992)

DESCRIPTION:

The Bell/Bremer house is located on a rectangular east/west site and is relatively modest in size compared with neighboring properties. To the north the house is bordered by a pair of Victorian terraces with a driveway adjacent to the boundary wall, and, on the south side, by a more modern property with white painted walls which abut the Bremer house site. The house is obscured from view from the road by the garage and boundary wall, which combine to form a very private space.

It is the only house conceived and completed by Bell without the constraint of a commissioning client and as such it is unique as an expression of his personal design philosophy and response to a specific site. Its clean modernist lines set it apart from its more traditional environmental context.

The house is described in the monograph *1952-1980 Architecture of Guilford Bell* as essentially a 'garden pavilion'. Alex Lawler refers to it as;

...a displaced wing of the Seccull house gliding into its narrow sit with fully glazed north windows looking out on to a wall of trees on the boundary (Lawler in Leon Van Schaik (Ed.) *The Lifework of Guilford Bell Architect, 1912-1992*, 1999, pp 206-207).

The house is single storey with a flat roof and is built of second hand bricks, originally left in their natural condition but now painted white. Its conceptual design follows one of Bell's renowned themes, that of compression/release. The entry from the street leads along the side of the modest front walled courtyard and through a narrow linear sideway to an entry hall flanked by kitchen, shower room and further to the left the study area. To the right the entry leads into the open living/dining space, which appears to stretch across the width and depth of the site. This effect is achieved by full length glazing on both the northern and southern sides and the strongly expressed horizontal ceiling beams which continue into the garden beyond. The unrestricted view extends into the four metre wide garden area with its tree-lined border to the left (north side) and to the narrow bamboo filled space to the right. It gives the impression of the site opening up into a roofed courtyard space whilst still fulfilling the enclosure required by a modern lifestyle. This expresses another of Bell's design concepts, that of the interchange of internal and external space. The rear of the living space is terminated by a wall of cedar boarding which gives entry to a more enclosed and intimate space containing two bedrooms separated by a core service area containing the en-suite bathroom. The full length glazing continues along the northern side of the bedrooms whilst the area is contained to the east and south by a passage way and external walls, or 'blanks' to use Bell's own terminology. Floors in the living area are of pink toned quarry tiles.

Planned on an east/west axis the house is an early example of solar access design principles. North light is managed and filtered across the site section by a succession of technical devices and strategies. On the outside of the floor to ceiling windows and doors the beams project out to support timber-screening battens which cut off the high summer sun. Along the north boundary of the courtyard the line of deciduous trees

shades the garden in summer, filters light into the rooms and allows the low winter sun to penetrate the house; simple but effective.

Extending the eastern notion of borrowed landscape the house now borrows reflected light from the adjoining white painted north face of the neighbor's wall. A method of reflecting light from the walls' surfaces facilitates the combination of the strong northern light from the long windows with a south back light, bouncing off this wall. This effectively balances the light and shadow contrast by illuminating all sides of objects and people in the living areas.

All of the finely sanded and sealed timber panelled ceilings throughout are intact and are visually connected to the floor by the timber panelled living room walls; a deliberate device to both tie together and separate the space. Pelmeted lighting complements the linearity of the roof and at night mimics the south reflected daylight and dappled north sunlight, penetrating the original lush 1970s planting scheme outside.

Guilford Bell's design for this house works from the inside outwards, and, the walls surrounding the site become the boundaries of the architectural design with carefully organised spaces arranged within. The house was not conceived as an external 'tour de force' and in fact is difficult to view from an external perspective. As one of Bell's most stripped back designs the Bell/Bremer House relies on its functional simplicity and spatial order. It is essentially a modern and private space for living pleasurably within the urban environment.

CONTEXT:

Located at the top of the Caroline Street hill the house is situated in a wide, leafy tree lined street, originally dominated by Victorian era terrace houses but with some later modern infill. Opposite are multi level flats which now threaten the privacy of the site and have probably been constructed since the house was built.

INTACTNESS:

The most significant change to the original work is that the second hand face brickwork of the walls has been painted an off white. At the time of its conception Bell was building in second hand bricks as exemplified by the Hallows House, Toorak (1975). An inspection in 2007 revealed the house to be relatively intact with the exception of some early changes made to the front garage area by Gerard De Preu. Bell disagreed with the changes but understood that they made sense to a contemporary lifestyle requirement. After a small fire in the 1980s the kitchen area was rebuilt to a design similar to the original. Naturally finished window and door frames, timber ceiling and wall linings are as original. The en-suite has been re-fitted in a simple contemporary manner.

Slipped amongst the planting is an inoffensive plunge pool that was added at a later date.

COMPARISON:

Throughout his long career Bell's domestic architecture continued to exploit several major themes, most of which derived from the experiences of his early years. The themes were constantly reiterated and refined in his subsequent houses. Many of these themes are evident in the design of the Bell/Bremer house, where he could give free reign to his own personal aesthetic without the constraint of a client. As Philip Goad quotes from a personal interview in 1988, Bell admitted to being concerned with 'the visual above all else' (Goad, in Van Schaik Ed., 1999, p.22). This was carried through into his meticulous manipulation of space and proportion to achieve variations of 'closed' and 'open' spaces. Visually, the 'open' spaces within the building was achieved by his use of full length glazing, with which he created the interplay of internal and external space, allowing the surrounding courtyard and garden to be part of the decorative element of his interiors. As he also stated in his interview with Goad (1988) elements such as 'conventional windows had no role'. Cut out windows were seen as limiting the boundary of his spaces and therefore floor to ceiling glazing was the preferred option. He valued the quality of materials and immaculate detail and saw no need for additional decorative elements. The minimalism of his interiors has resulted in a legacy of houses which have regained their popularity for the twentieth century lifestyle. The Bell/Bremer (1976) house is an excellent example of these recurring themes.

Bell's other signature houses were designed for specific clients, with whom he is said to have had a high level of 'understanding and communication'. Yvonne Rockman, referring to her collaboration with Bell on the Rockman House, Toorak (1975), is quoted as saying that he educated her taste and understanding of 'the meaning of space and material' (Nash, in Van Schaik Ed., 1999, p.183). The result according to her was that the house was 'a very special place as far as spirit went'. Bell himself said that his response to a site was 'primarily intuitive' and he tried to convey this to his clients. He had a number of architectural ideas that he repeated over and over again, at different scales and in subtly different ways, 'as if he were perfecting them'.

Throughout Guilford Bell's career a recurrent theme is the square. Over a period of years he designed the Willy House Toorak (1972); the Seccull house Lorne (1973) and the Grant-Collins house at Officer (1986), all seeking the perfect solution to the 'designer imposed stricture' (Clerehan, 'Bell Obituary', 1992).

Bell's work for many years remained private and unpublished in contrast to that of contemporary architects such as Robin Boyd. Boyd took a more 'dramatic' approach in the establishment of his themes (Goad, in Van Schaik Ed.). Along with other important architects like Peter McIntyre, Boyd was more innovative and daring in his design concepts and more technically experimental: 'Stargazer' and Snellerman houses (McIntyre, 1953 and 1954); Richardson and Clemson houses (Boyd, 1954 and 1957). In his Foy house (Beaumaris 1953) Boyd like Bell is described as 'blurring the distinctions between inside and out' (Goad, Melbourne Architecture, 1999, p167). Some of these houses were so experimental for the capability of the times that they, unlike those of Bell, have not stood the test of time and many are in need of repair. Roy Grounds, although more classically restrained explored different geometric forms (Henty and Grounds houses (1953 and 1954), and also included the concept of a hidden, private courtyard. The 1950s, 60s and 70s were a richly diverse period for the

revival of Australian domestic architecture and Guilford Bell's work is now recognised in publications for its significant contribution and relevance.

OTHER HOUSES OF IMPORTANCE

Primary : Bardas House, South Yarra (1958) (now demolished); Simon House, Mount Eliza (1963); Purcell House, Ivanhoe (1964); Seccull House, Brighton (1972); Willy House, Toorak (1972); Grant House, Officer (1986); Other types : Fairfax Pavilion, Bowral, NSW (1969), Practice Office, South Yarra (1992)

Secondary : Kimpton House/Flinders House, Flinders (1958); Steeman House, South Yarra (1963), Clemenger House, Toorak (1981).

REFERENCES

1952-1980 Architecture of Guilford Bell, Proteus Publishing, South Melbourne, 1982
The Lifework of Guilford Bell Architect, 1912-1992, Leon Van Schaik (Ed.), Bookman Press, 1999
Neil Clerehan, *Obituary: Guilford Marsh Bell*, RMIT Transition 38.
Philip Goad, *Melbourne Architecture*, The Watermark Press, Sydney, 1999

ASSESSMENT AGAINST CRITERIA:

- e Importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics.*
Aesthetically and architecturally the Bell/Bremer house successfully incorporates the concept of design for the whole site. The extensive use of full height glazing is designed to exploit the visual interaction of internal and external space and extend the limits of the living areas. The perimeter of the site is seen as the boundary of the total design and as a function of personal privacy. Both internal and external spaces are regulated by a technique of compression and release to give vitality to the design. The streamlined efficient and simple design exhibits Bell's concern for perfection and total order.
- f. Importance in demonstrating a high degree of creative or technical achievement at a particular period.*
The Bell/Bremer house is an early example of ecological sustainability. It is constructed from second hand bricks and makes extensive use of natural materials both internally and externally. It is designed with significant features to maximise solar energy and control light across the living areas. Many of the strategies employed by Bell have influenced the design of later houses.

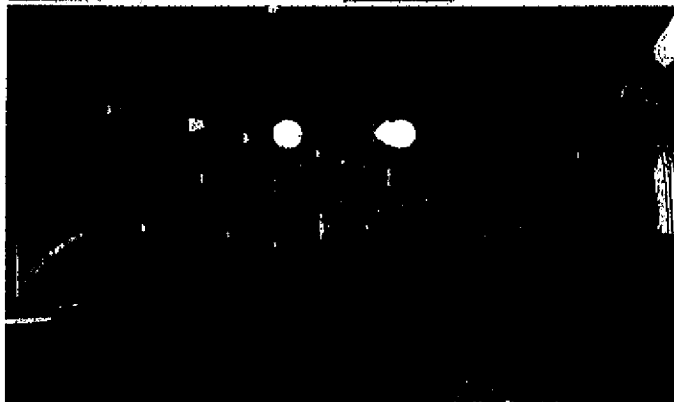
h. Special association with the life or works of a person, or group of persons, of importance in Victoria's history.

Guilford Bell's career was mainly concerned with the design of houses for commissioning clients. The Bell/ Bremer house is unique in that it was designed and completed by him to his own brief and incorporates many of the signature themes and modernist design principles that he had been refining and developing over his long career. The significance and relevance of Bell's domestic architecture has been recognised by contemporary architects and architectural commentators as particularly relevant to modern living. The concepts employed in the design of the Bell/Bremer house continue to be an influence on the design of many homes on restricted urban sites in the twenty first century.

Bell's contribution to architecture was recognised in 1981 with the award of an OBE for his work on the Official Establishment Trust.



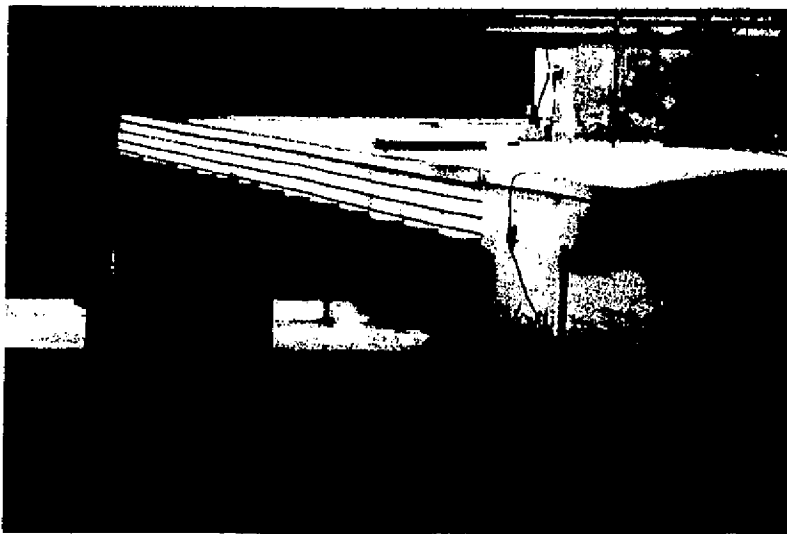
View of side courtyard facing south Source: Real Estate Inspection 2007



View of living area facing south bedrooms. Source: Real Estate Inspection 2007.



View of frontage facing Caroline Street 2009



View of side courtyard and roof 2009.



View of living room facing front door

Source: Real Estate Inspection 2007.

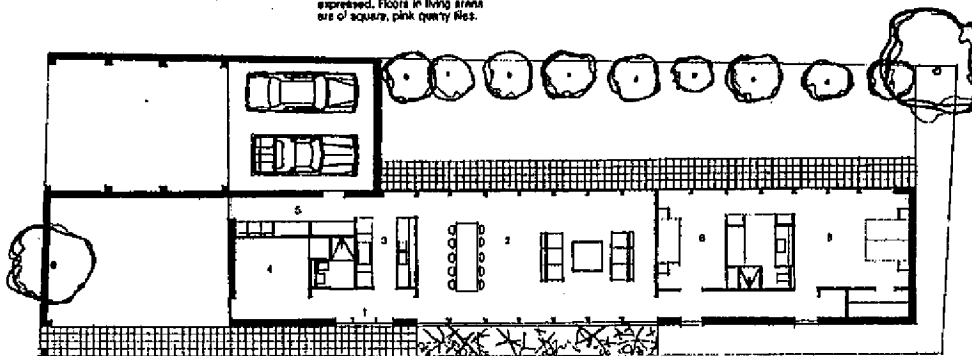
Bremer House at South Yarra. 1976.

This 116 square metre house was designed and built without client requirements.

It is essentially a garden pavilion house with all main rooms facing north to a long narrow walled garden. On the south side, it is only 1200 mm from the boundary and the space to the living room is filled with tall bamboo — quite visible through the glazed wall of the living room.

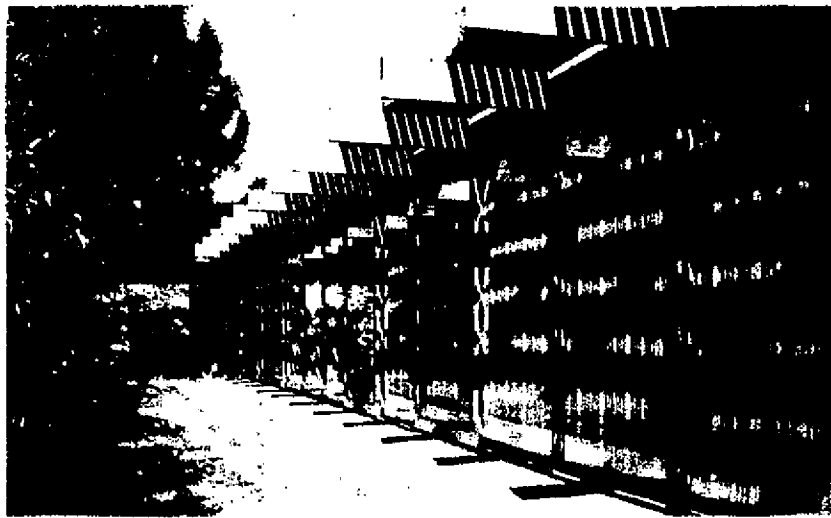
The end walls and the ceiling of the living room are of cedar bowstring and the ceiling beams are expressed. Floors in living areas are of square, pink quartz tiles.

- 1 Hall
- 2 Living Dining
- 3 Kitchen
- 4 Study
- 5 Utility
- 6 Bedroom



Source: 1952-1980 Architecture of Gifford Bell, Proteus Publishing, South Melbourne, 1982





View of side courtyard facing south.

Source: *1952-1980 Architecture of Guilford Bell*, Proteus Publishing, South Melbourne, 1982.



View of living area facing front door.

Source: *1952-1980 Architecture of Guilford Bell*, Proteus Publishing, South Melbourne, 1982.

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