

10 BLACKFRIARS CLOSE TOORAK

INTRODUCTION

This report has been prepared by Bryce Raworth Pty Ltd to investigate the significance of the property at 10 Blackfriars Close, Toorak, in order to determine the appropriateness of its inclusion within the schedule to the Heritage Overlay within the planning scheme. The report builds on work carried out by John Curtis Pty Ltd for the *Toorak Residential Character Study*, 1991 and by Context Pty Ltd for the *City of Prahran Conservation Review*, 1993.

The *City of Prahran Conservation Review* graded the building as A1. It is not listed on the Victorian Heritage Register or the Register of the National Estate or classified by the National Trust.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

This report finds that 10 Blackfriars Close is of state significance and should be added to the schedule to the Heritage Overlay in the local section of the Stonnington Planning Scheme and nominated to the Australian Heritage Commission for inclusion in the register of the National Estate.

HISTORY

The first development to occur on the site of Blackfriars Close was in 1907 when the large home Warrawee¹ with its extensive garden, was built near the north east corner of Robertson Road and Orrong Road. Previously, vacant land extended from Struan Street and Orrong Road to Quissisana, the early home fronting Grange Road.² A steep gully and creek running down to the Yarra River, cut across the centre of the allotment, with Warrawee, located near the east corner of Orrong Road.³

Warrawee was designed by prominent architect Walter Butler and the creek and gully formed part of the extensive property's 'wild garden', reputedly one of the earliest native gardens in Australia.⁴ Blackfriars Close, subdivided from the western end of Warrawee's garden, was created under a private street scheme in 1955.⁵ In 1954-5, Robyn Boyd designed number 10, one of a group of contemporary houses at the northern end of the Close which nestle into the slope, surrounded by native gardens.⁶ Blackfriars Close slopes down towards the valley and the Robyn Boyd house takes full advantage of this unusual site.

Warrawee, which became the home of Harold Darling and later Bernard Evans,⁷ survived on a reduced allotment until the 1980s. It would appear Warrawee's stables, now converted to a house, remain at the western corner of Blackfriars Close and Robertson Road.⁸

1 Architectural drawing by Walter Butler for Rutter-Clarke, 1907, State Library of Victoria Collection.

2 MMBW plan 1895.

3 MMBW plan undated.

4 Context Pty Ltd. *Conservation Review*, City of Prahran, 1993, p. 81.

5 Although listed under a private street scheme in 1955, Blackfriars Close is shown on a working drawing in 1952. Refer footnote 8.

6 Context, loc cit.

7 Sands and McDougall Directories, 1940s -1960s

8 H. Garnet, Alsop & Partners, working drawing of proposed alterations to form residence in existing building at Robertson Street for Misses E & C. Cunningham, 1952. Original drawing in private ownership. Copy in Prahran Archives.

DESCRIPTION

10 Blackfriars Close is located at the head of a small residential *cul de sac* in Toorak. It occupies an unusual site divided by a dry creek bed. The house was designed by the renowned Australian architect, Robin Boyd, who allowed the limitations of the site to provide the catalyst for an extraordinary design solution. At the time of construction, in the 1950s, the creek bed doubled as a Board of Works drainage easement⁹ In order to safeguard his building against the possibility of enforced future demolition, Boyd proposed a house suspended above the creek bed to allow access to the easement. Boyd's bridge house was designed in conjunction with the well known Australian engineer, Bill Irwin, who advised on the structural feasibility of this radical design.¹⁰ The Craig Elwood design, entitled 'Bridge House over a ravine, L.A.', is sometimes mistakenly cited as the inspiration for this design. In fact 10 Blackfriars Close predates the Elwood design by ten years.¹¹ The house was built in 1954¹² by A.Clissold Pty Ltd,¹³ for Mr and Mrs G.A. Richardson, and is known today as the Richardson House.

A preoccupation with geometry is evident throughout the Richardson house, from the wedge shaped arrangements of the plan, to the elliptical, steel bridge trusses which support the two longitudinal walls of the house.¹⁴ Boyd's concern for geometry in this building compares with that of his partner, Roy Grounds, for whom geometry was a lifelong obsession.¹⁵ Bold geometric form and structural daring characterise the most notable works of Boyd and other post-war modernists in Melbourne. The brave design of the Richardson house reflects the atmosphere of confidence and enthusiasm that typified post-war Melbourne, and peaked with the 1956 Olympic Games.

The living areas of the house are hung from the elliptical bridge trusses and are constructed in a manner found rarely in residential construction of the time. The house is a portal framed structure with glass infill sections and a flat concrete roof.¹⁶ The elevated location of the house places it high amongst the canopy of long established trees as well as in the midst of a more recently planted rainforest setting.¹⁷ A small timber and steel bridge leads to the front door in a manner that recalls Boyd's South Yarra House. A steep driveway leads to three car parking spaces under the house,¹⁸ which utilise the suspended house as an economical carport.¹⁹

9 Norman Day, *Heroic Melbourne: architecture of the 1950s*, p 7.

10 Geoffrey Serle, *Robin Boyd: a life*, p 185.

11 Philip Goad, review of *Heroic Melbourne: Architecture of the 1950's*, see *Architecture Australia*, 85, no. 3, p 34.

12 R. Boyd, *Living in Australia*, p 129.

13 *Prahran City Council Data Sheet- 10 Blackfriars Close*.

14 Context Pty Ltd, *City of Prahran Conservation Review*, Vol. 3, p 16.

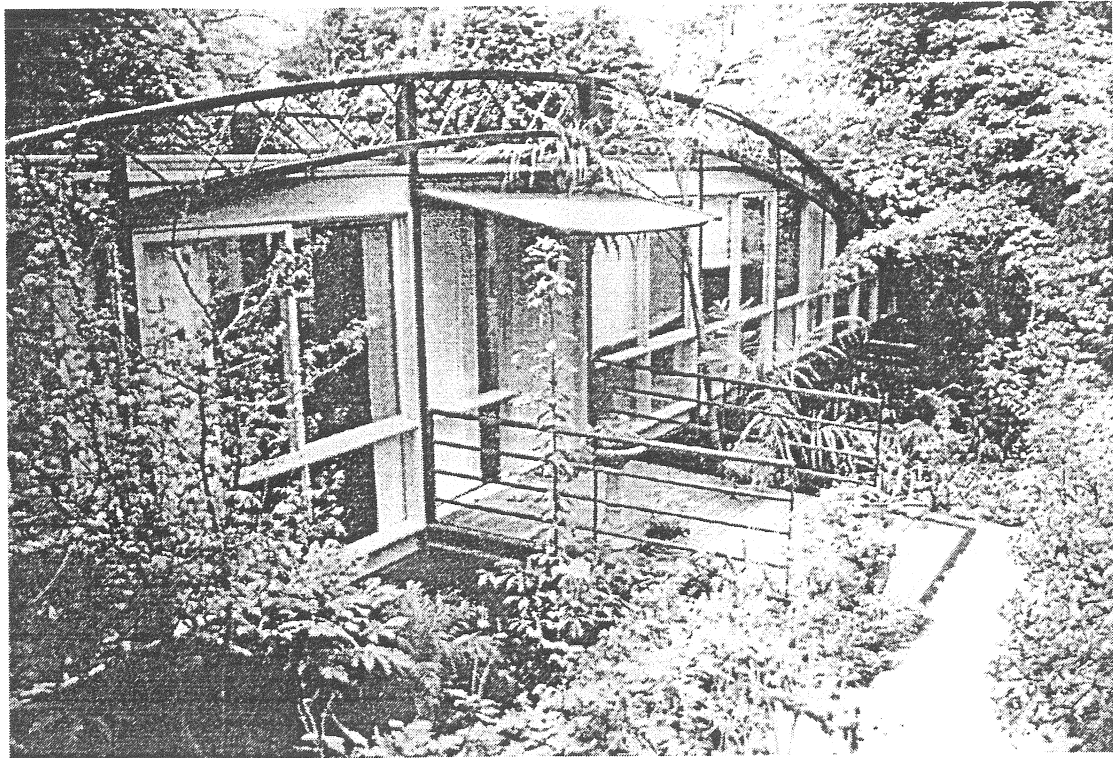
15 J.M. Freeland, *Architecture in Australia*, p 276.

16 Context Pty Ltd, op cit, Vol. 3, p 16.

17 'A modern gem for the collector', *The Age*, 19/6/1996.

18 Ibid.

19 Boyd, op cit, p 129.



*Illustration 1 The Richardson House, 10 Blackfriars Close, c. 1996.
Source: Age, 19 July 1996.*

Extensive modifications were carried out on the house in 1982 by V.Rauras Pty Ltd for Mr and Mrs Harper,²⁰ however Boyd's original concept has been respected and left largely intact. The house was predominantly open plan from its first conception, and retains many free-flowing areas. The front door opens directly to a timber floored dining room which leads to a semi-circular steel framed balcony, accessed by full height glass doors.²¹ The modifications of 1982 included the addition of a three storey extension to the west side of the house and a hallway to connect the old section of the house to the extension. The new area contains four bathrooms and four bedrooms. It is said that the Richardson house was once on Melbourne's tourist bus route because it is so unusual.²² However, a hedge of bamboo and a high paling fence currently shield the house, almost completely obscuring it from the street.

ARCHITECT

Robin Boyd was arguably one of Australia's most important architects. Born in 1919 into a family of famous artists, he studied architecture at the University of Melbourne. In 1947, Boyd entered private practice before forming a partnership with Roy Grounds and Frederick Romberg in 1953. Grounds,

20 Prahran Council Building Permits.

21 'A modern gem for the collector', *The Age*, 19/6/1996.

22 Ibid.

Romberg & Boyd became a successful practice and a major influence on structural expressionist developments in Melbourne through the 1950s.

Boyd was equally well known as an architectural commentator. He was the first to trace a comprehensive history of architecture in Victoria in his book *Victorian Modern.*, and continued his successful writing career with *Australia's Home* and *The Australian Ugliness*. From 1947 to 1954, he contributed the *RAIA Small Homes Service* column to the *Age*. As the partnership with Grounds and Romberg slowly dissolved through the early 1960s, Boyd turned his attention more fully toward architectural discourse. He was appointed Dean of Architecture at Melbourne University in 1971, but died before taking up the position. The Royal Australian Institute of Architects awarded Boyd a Life Fellowship and he received the Institute's prestigious the Gold Medal in 1970.²³ He was also an Honorary Fellow of the American Institute of Architects.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The Richardson house is noteworthy both as a surviving residential construction by Robin Boyd and as an illustration of the work of Melbourne's structural expressionists. In terms of its structural daring, it shares certain similarities with the 1954 Ctesiphon House and shop for W. Wood in Jordansville, a structure made from sprayed concrete.²⁴

Boyd is perhaps best known as a domestic architect, although his reputation as an essayist and author is also very strong. Amongst his houses the most comparable work might be the Foy House, Beaumaris (1953-56) which shares a similar curved section to the Richardson House but is set directly on ground with a curved roof.

In the broader sphere, comparison might be made between the central structural theme of this building and the design of other well known, significant buildings such as the Olympic Swimming Pool (1954-65), Peter Macintyre's Butterfly House (1952-54), the Sidney Myer Music Bowl (Yuncken Freeman Brothers, Griffiths & Simpson; 1959) and the Australian Academy of Science headquarters, ACT (Grounds, Romberg & Boyd; 1958).

The Richardson House is one of Boyd's most famous and highly publicised houses. Although altered it retains its integrity with respect to its central structural theme and remains a key element in his oeuvre.

23 Ibid.

24 *Transition*, No.38, p 202.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Richardson house is of state architectural and historical significance. It represents a landmark in the career of notable Melbourne architect, Robin Boyd and offers a significant insight into the architecture of Melbourne during the 1950s. Boyd is generally regarded among Australia's leading post-war architectural figures for his work as a designer, a commentator and as a prominent figure among Melbourne's structural expressionist architects. The house is a fine example of Boyd's domestic work and is of enhanced significance by virtue of its unusual and elegant structural system.

REFERENCES

- Robin Boyd & Mark Strzic, *Living in Australia*, Sydney, 1972.
- City of Prahran Building Permit Records.
- City of Prahran Data Sheets.
- City of Prahran Rate Books.
- Context Pty Ltd, *Conservation Review, City of Prahran*.
- Norman Day, *Heroic Melbourne: Architecture of the 1950s*, Melbourne, 1996.
- Sands & McDougall Directories.
- Geoffrey Serle, *Robin Boyd: a life*, Melbourne.
- Transition, *Robin Boyd*, Special Issue No 38, Melbourne 1992.
- Age, 'A modern gem for the collector', 19/6/1996.
- J.M. Freeland, *Architecture in Australia*, Melbourne, 1968.
- Prahran Archives Drawing Collection.

SUBMISSION TO THE CITY OF STONNINGTON IN RELATION TO THE INCLUSION IN
AMENDMENT L40 TO THE STONNINGTON PLANNING SCHEME OF

**10 BLACKFRIARS CLOSE
TOORAK**

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September 1998

1.0 Introduction

This submission has been prepared on behalf of Joshua and Karen Liberman, the owners of the property at 10 Blackfriars Close, Toorak. In December 1997, the property was included in Amendment L40, which sought to include buildings identified as being of individual significance in the Stonnington Planning Scheme. The owners of the property having objected to the listing of 10 Blackfriars Close, the Minister was requested to appoint a panel to consider the owners' submission. Subsequent discussions have been held between the owners' solicitors, Clayton Utz, and Council officers and have addressed the possibility of introducing a site-specific control over the property.

This submission has been prepared in support of a proposed site-specific control which would provide for an appropriate level of protection over the significant elements of the building and site.

2.0 History and Assessment of Significance

The property at 10 Blackfriars Close has been the subject of a conservation report prepared by Council's consultant, Bryce Raworth, who has provided an account of the history of the subdivision of Blackfriars Close and the development of the subject site.

In 1907 a large residence was designed by prominent Melbourne architect, Walter Butler, was constructed near the corner of Robertson Road and Orrong Road. At this time, apart from Warrawee, and the earlier residence, Quissisana, which faced onto Grange Road, the block bounded by Struan Street to the north, Orrong Road to the east, Robertson Street to the south and Grange Road to the west, still lay vacant. A steep gully and creek (noted as a 'drain' on an early twentieth century MMBW plan of the area, see Fig. 1) ran generally east-west across the block. The creek and gully formed part of Warrawee's extensive grounds, in which one of Australia's earliest native gardens was reputedly developed.¹

In the mid-1950s, under a private street scheme, the western part of the Warrawee garden was subdivided and the cul-de-sac Blackfriars Close created.² A number of houses were constructed at the northern end of Blackfriars Close in the years that followed. These were generally set into the slope and surrounded by native gardens.³

No. 10 Blackfriars Close was designed for Mr and Mrs G A Richardson in 1953-4 by architect Robin Boyd, of the practice Grounds, Romberg and Boyd.⁴ The house was constructed by contractor A Clissold Ltd.⁵

Unusual in terms of both its shape and topography, the Richardson house site was divided by a dry creek bed which was also a designated Board of Works drainage and sewerage easement. The house, therefore, had to be designed to allow access to the easement. The site itself also sloped quite steeply away from Blackfriars Close. As Raworth has noted, rather than viewing these site constraints as limitations on his design, Boyd allowed them to provide the catalyst for an extraordinary design solution.⁶

With engineering input from Bill Irwin, Boyd designed the house so as to span the creek bed. The house was suspended from steel lattice arches set at a slight angle to one another, and giving the house a wedge-shaped plan form.⁷ A working drawing held by the City of Stonnington and dated January 1954 (see Figs 2-4)⁸ shows a portal framed structure with glass infill sections and a flat aluminium-clad roof suspended from the steel arches. The eastern section of the house (the apex of the wedge) was designed as a large balcony area, enclosed by fly wire screens, while the main body of the residence

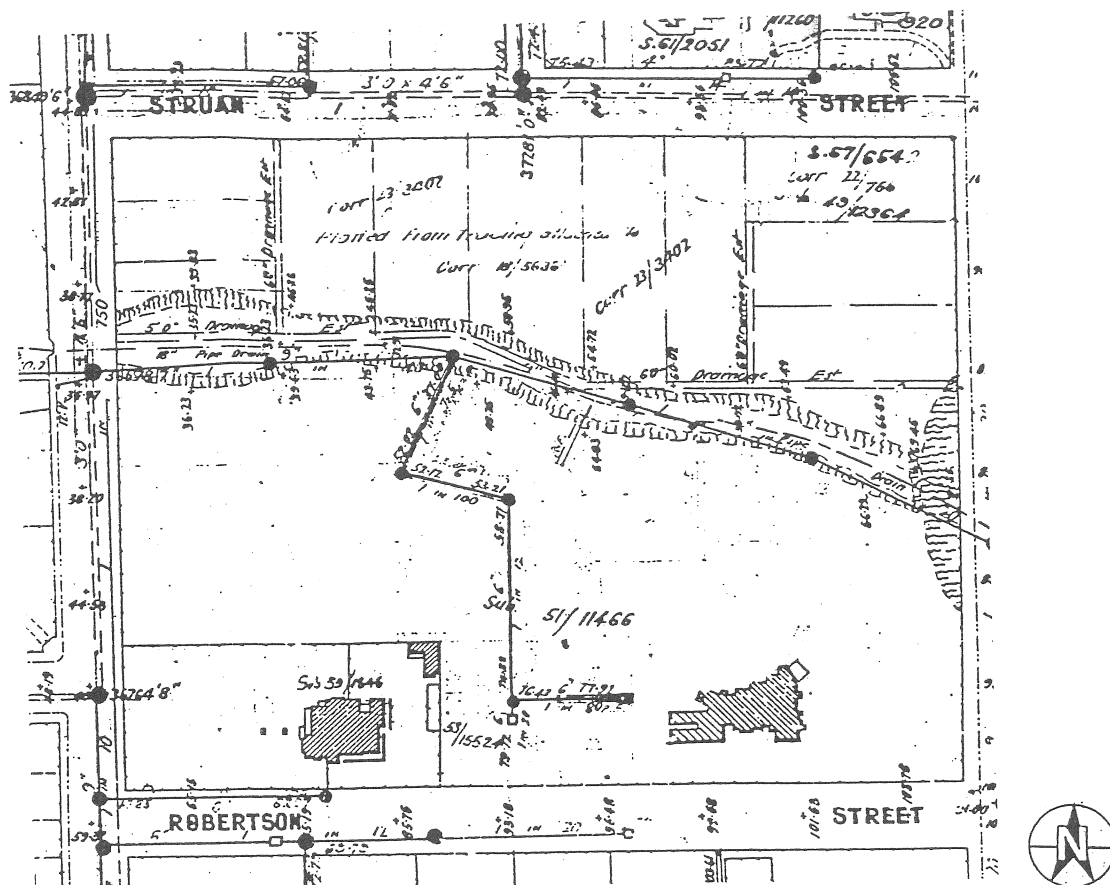


Figure 1 Undated MMBW plan, showing the location of Warrawee and Quissisana.

comprised two bedrooms, with a dressing room between, kitchen, bathroom, bar and dining room.⁹ The drawing shows the front door as accessed from a carparking area on the south side (closest to Blackfriars Close) via a small timber and steel bridge. Parking spaces were eventually located beneath the house itself, which effectively formed a carport structure.¹⁰ A second door was located on the west side of the house and was accessed via a walkway leading from Blackfriars Close. The walkway continued some distance westward, and led to a small detached laundry building and a clothes hoist. The working drawing indicates that significant landscaping works were undertaken as part of the project, with the natural fall of the land being cut away and levelled or otherwise altered in a number of areas.

In 1982, major alterations and extensions were made to the house. These alterations were designed by Melbourne architect, Peter Crone. Changes to the original Boyd house included the construction of a new entry ramp on the south side of the house, and a new steel-framed balcony with external access stair on the north side. Extensive modifications were made to the interior, including the replacement of the floors and ceilings, although a general feeling of openness was maintained in the internal planning. Crone also designed a large three-storey (basement plus two-storeys) addition which was constructed on the west side of the original building, (replacing the original laundry, walkway and clothes hoist) and was connected to the original house via a single-storey hallway. The addition incorporates a swimming pool, sauna and bathroom at ground floor level and bedroom, bathroom and dressingroom accommodation on the upper levels.

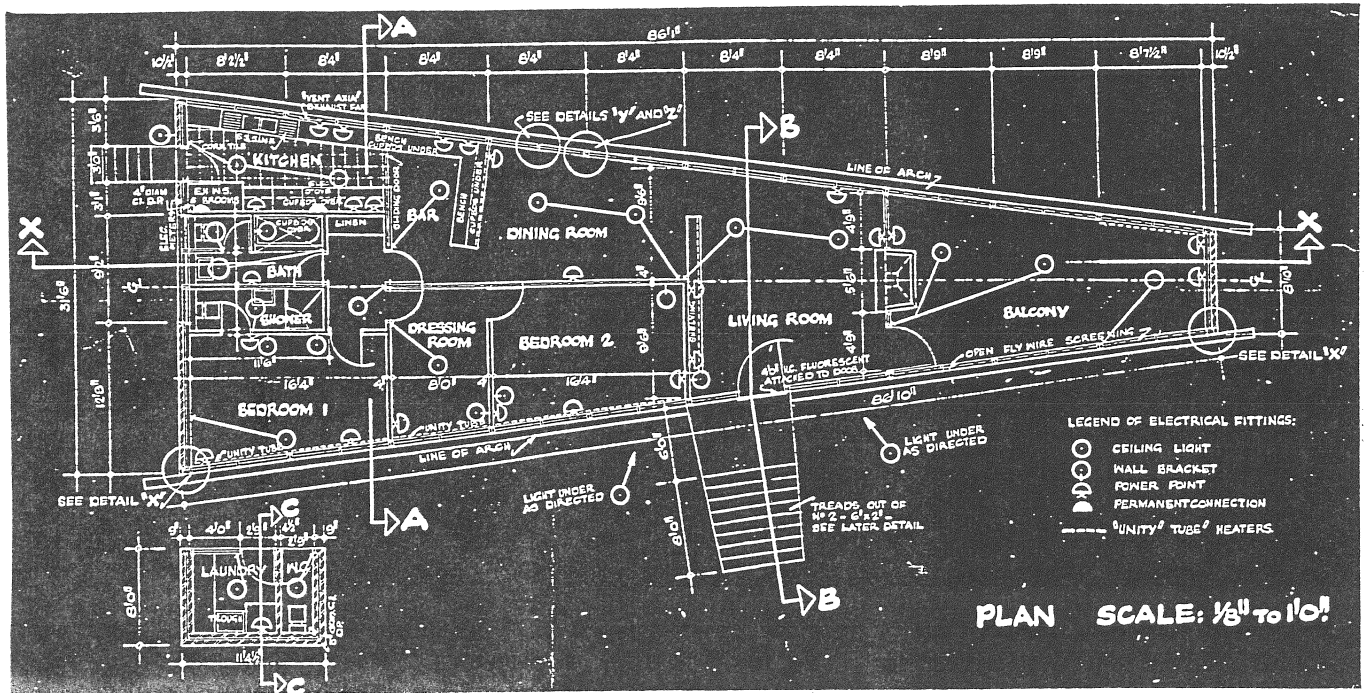


Figure 2 Plan, Richardson House, 1954

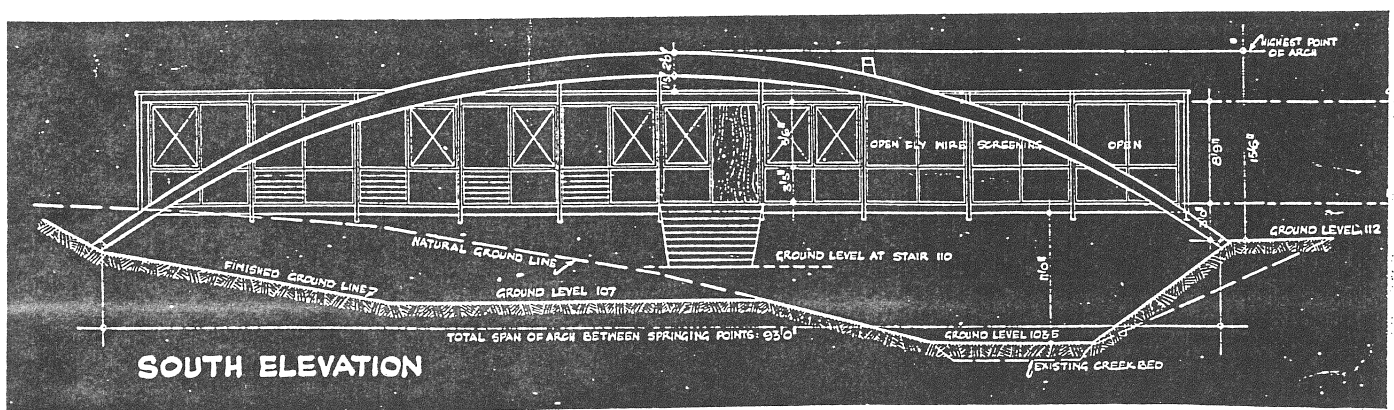


Figure 3 South elevation, Richardson House, 1954.

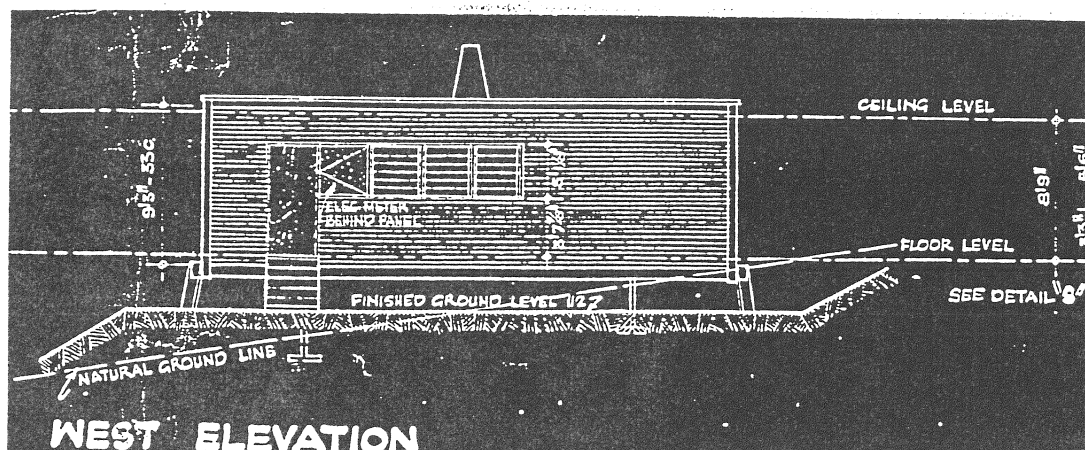
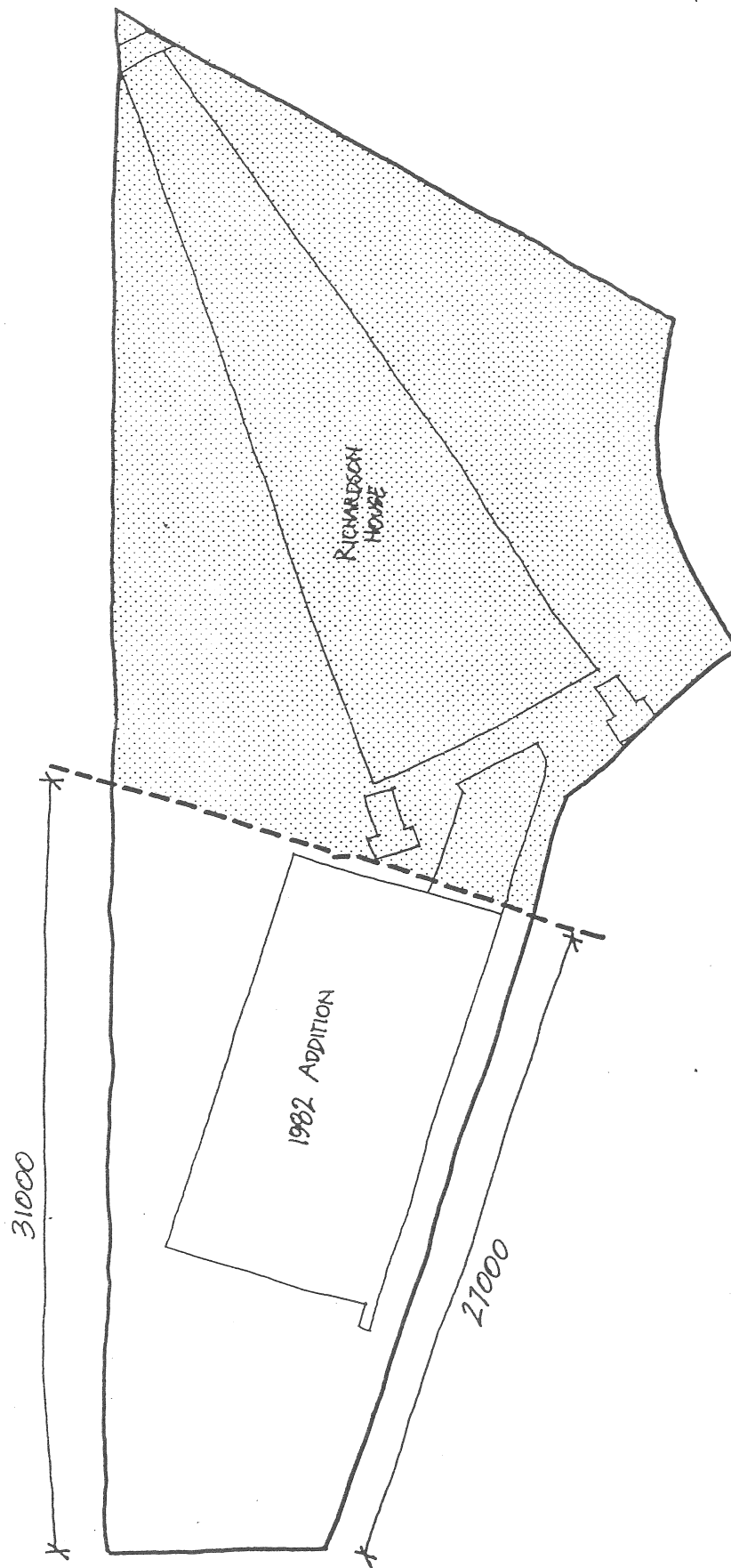


Figure 4 West elevation, Richardson House, 1954

Assessment of Significance

The 1954 Richardson House is architecturally significant as a relatively intact and unusual example of Robin Boyd's domestic works and, in the wider context, as an innovative and unusual example of 1950s residential design in Melbourne and Victoria.

The Richardson house demonstrates a number of Boyd's interests during this period of the early to mid-1950s. In terms of both its form and design, the house reflects Boyd's concern, as expressed in his 1952 *Australia's Home*, that architects and clients embrace their landscape, environment and climate.¹¹ Just as the overall form of the house addressed the landform on which it was built, its large areas of glazing and wire netted balcony looked very much to the outdoors. Like his Foy House, in Beaumaris, also designed in 1953, and the Ctesiphon House and Shop for W Wood in Ashburton (1952-4), the Richardson House also reflected Boyd's interest in structural experimentation, an interest which he shared with a group of Melbourne's younger architects in the early to mid 1950s. Other well known examples of this interest in the relationship between structure and form were the Olympic Swimming Pool (Borland, McIntyre and John & Phyllis Murphy, 1965-56), the Sidney Myer Music Bowl (Yuncken, Freeman Brothers, Griffiths & Simpson, 1959), and the Academy of Science Headquarters in Canberra (Grounds, Romberg & Boyd, 1958). Residential works of the early to mid-1950s which were variations on this theme of structural expressionism included Roy Grounds' *Leyser House* in Kew (1951), Boyd's *Pelican* at Mount Eliza (demolished), Kevin Borland's *Rice House* at Eltham (1952) and Dione and Peter McIntyre's *McIntyre House* at Kew (c.1954).



ALLOM LOVELL & ASSOCIATES
10 BLACKFRIARS CLOSE
PROPOSED EXTENT OF
HERITAGE OVERLAY CONTROL

Figure 5 Proposed extent of Heritage Overlay Control

Level of Significance

The significance of the Richardson House has been compromised to some extent by the 1980s alterations and additions. Though these alterations have been executed in a manner which is broadly sympathetic to Boyd's original conception, it is not considered now that the building is of such a level of significance and intactness as to warrant addition to the Victorian Heritage Register. It is, however, considered to be a building which warrants statutory protection under the provisions of the local planning scheme as a building of particular architectural merit. Like a limited number of buildings in Stonnington and elsewhere, the significance of the Richardson House does not relate particularly to its contribution to the character and appearance of the surrounding area and/or streetscapes. Rather its significance relates to a very specific issue of innovative design directed by unusual siting.

3.0 The Proposed Amendment

The site-specific control which is proposed for 10 Blackfriars Close has been developed in order to more accurately reflect the nature and significance of the property as a whole. 10 Blackfriars Close is now a property which has been significantly altered by the construction of a substantial addition and most recently the acquisition of land to the west of the site. While intentionally designed and sited in a manner which does not impact greatly on an appreciation of the design of the original house, neither the Crone addition to the west nor the connecting passage, are of any significance in their own right.

Given this situation it is proposed that Heritage Overlay controls should apply to the Boyd house and the land immediately related to that house, excluding the extension and the land on which it stands, as shown in Fig. 5. Under this control, a permit would be required for any external alterations to the original house (to the extent that they change its external appearance, and excluding routine maintenance and repairs) and for the construction of any new buildings on that part of the site identified on the plan. Such approval would not be required for works to the 1982 building. Council would, however, retain control over any proposal to subdivide any part of the property.

This approach is one which would result in an appropriate level of protection for the significant elements on the site.

Endnotes

- 1 B Raworth. 10 Blackfriars Close, Toorak. [Prepared for the City of Stonnington,
- 2 B Raworth. 10 Blackfriars Close, Toorak. p. 2.
- 3 B Raworth. 10 Blackfriars Close, Toorak. p. 2.
- 4 Grounds, Romberg & Boyd. Proposed House for G A Richardson Esq., at Blackfriars
S.E.2, Preliminary Sketch (October 1953), Grounds, Romberg & Boyd. Residence
Esq., at Blackfriars Close, Toorak, S.E.2 (January 1954). Drawings held by the C
- 5 R Boyd. *Living in Australia*, p. 129, quoted in B Raworth. 10 Blackfriars Close,
- 6 B Raworth. 10 Blackfriars Close, Toorak, p. 3.
- 7 G Serle. *Robin Boyd: A Life*. Miegunyah Press, Melbourne, 1995. p. 185.
- 8 Grounds, Romberg & Boyd. Residence for G Richardson Esq., at Blackfriars Clos
(January 1954).
- 9 Grounds, Romberg & Boyd. Residence for G Richardson Esq., at Blackfriars Clos
(January 1954).
- 10 B Raworth. 10 Blackfriars Close, Toorak. p. 3.
- 11