Home Magazines and Modernist Dreams: Designing the 1950s House
Alastair Greig
Urban Research Program, Working Paper No.47
April 1995

and

'A Cliff of White Cleanliness': Decorating the Home, Defining the Self
Nicholas Brown
Urban Research Program, Working Paper No.48
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Series Editor:
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Preface

These two papers have been brought together in an effort to broaden the debate over the meaning and significance of the 'modern' home in the 1950s. While the papers are to a large degree self-contained, they draw upon arguments with broader claims, and it might be helpful to readers to have a sense of those provenances and objectives.

Alastair Greig's paper examines the modern home through the medium of Australian House and Garden, and qualifies some functionalist sociological interpretations of the 'role' of home magazines and their promotion of modernism. It expands the argument of a later chapter in The Stuff Dreams Are Made Of: Housing Provision in Australia 1945-1960 (MUP, 1995). This book is a study of the interconnections between the socio-economic and technological context of home building, the mechanisms of housing supply, the nature of housing demand and the influence of housing design in that period. Nicholas Brown's paper dwells on some aspects of domestic architecture to a greater extent than was possible in Governing Prosperity: Social Analysis and Social Change in the 1950s (CUP, 1995). The paper develops the interest of that book in the ways in which more subjective areas of experience became an integral part of the governing of post-war society, in this instance in relation to the forms and spaces of the 'modern' home.

Both Greig and Brown's books seek to contribute to the current reappraisal of the significance of the 1950s by countering the neat periodisation and nostalgic appeal of that decade with a greater attention to issues of political economy in Greig's case and to a longer process of institutional and intellectual adjustment for Brown. Their two projects were pursued completely separately from each other and these papers are brought together here largely as a result of a fortunate coincidence. Nevertheless, their different perspectives on the same issues make for an interesting composite study of a new area.
HOME MAGAZINES AND MODERNIST DREAMS: DESIGNING THE 1950s HOUSE

Alastair Greig

‘What gives our dreams their daring is that they can be realised’
Le Corbusier

1. HISTORICAL SETTING

In the aftermath of World War II, Australia experienced its most severe housing shortage this century, estimated to be in the region of 300,000 dwellings. The magnitude of this housing crisis was inflated by the sharp decline in building activity during the Great Depression and the war, an acute shortage of construction labour, a dearth of most conventional building materials, high rates of new household formation and a programme of mass immigration. Housing provision was affected by other unprecedented phenomena during the late 1940s and throughout most of the 1950s. The state embarked upon a large public rental housebuilding program, much of which – especially after 1956 – was sold for owner occupation. In addition, during the fifteen years after the war more Australians than ever before assumed the responsibility for building their own dwelling. Furthermore, Australia experienced a dramatic rise in the level of owner occupation between 1947 and 1961 from 52.6 per cent to almost 70 per cent. In retrospect, this period represents a significant leap between two historical plateaux.

This combination of unique, and in some cases unforeseen, circumstances coincided with an upsurge in modernist ideas in house design and planning. From the late 1940s onward, this modernist philosophy struggled valiantly to meet the challenge of the post-war housing crisis, and to enter the hearts, minds and especially the homes of every household.

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1 I would like to express my gratitude to Graham Holland, Nicholas Brown, Lesley Johnson, Mark Peel and participants at the Federated PhD Scheme—Housing and Urban Studies, at the ANU in December 1994 for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

This paper attempts to unpack the meanings, and examine the significance, of 'modernism' as it arose within discourses surrounding the residential built environment during the immediate post-war period. This will support my claim that these exceptional social, economic and aesthetic circumstances were interrelated. The form of modernism analysed in this paper is drawn from interpretations within influential and popular home magazines, with special attention devoted to *Australian House and Garden*.

2. **HOME MAGAZINES AND POPULAR CULTURE**

Despite the recent upsurge in interest in post-war popular culture, there have been few attempts to assess the impact and influence of popular magazines. This is somewhat surprising given the substantial attention which has been given to post-war understandings of the home, the garden and suburbia. However, there are some exceptions. Bonney and Wilson's analysis of the post-war *Australian Women's Weekly* examined how femininity was subject to modification by historically specific circumstances such as war, post-war consumerism and suburban growth. More recently, Blackburn's analysis of the advertising industry noted the important role which home magazines performed during the period of post-war consumerism. The advertising industry propagated a 'new ideology of consumption' or a 'consumers' ethic' which was used by mass manufacturers to educate young families into the lifestyle of mass consumption and post-war prosperity. According to Blackburn, popular magazines were willing carriers of this message. He identified the *Australian Woman's Weekly* and *Home Beautiful* as 'major agents of the consumer faith'. The latter magazine 'developed a format in which most of its articles and all of its advertisements were directed to the promotion of products that embellished the home'. The message carried throughout the magazine was that a successful marriage was based on the purchase of a range of new consumer durables. Advertising and feature articles became

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less distinguishable 'as large amounts of advertising money and improved techniques meant that advertisements could be more frequently integrated into the text'.

Connell and Irving have also pointed to the relationship between popular magazines, mass consumerism, post-war capitalist development and suburbanisation:

Home ownership in the suburbs as a desirable form of life, as well as the equipment necessary for it, was actively sold to the working class...Popular magazines after the war spread the gospel of 'modern' styling, along with the message of high consumption; the electrical equipment increasingly invading the household spread the same tastes.7

In each case, these authors see the function of popular magazines as being tightly bound to the logic of post-war capital accumulation and mass consumerism, and link it to the promotion of specific forms of patriarchy, femininity and consumption.8

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6 In the early post-war Australian Women's Weekly, one could have been forgiven for thinking that a successful marriage was based on hygiene (see for example, the advertisements for Lifebuoy soap).


8 This approach at least represented an advance of earlier structuralist-functionalist approaches to the popular press, which tended to emphasise the role such magazines performed in maintaining social cohesion and in instilling values appropriate to one's standing. According to Barber: "The advertisements presented in the mass media have a share in their class socialising functions. The facts and attitudes conveyed by the advertisements provide people with part of what they need to know if they seek to symbolise their social class position, or to maintain or advance it ... In a great many other areas of behaviour, advertisements serve to inform people about patterns of consumption that are required in their social class position. For example, people rising into and within the middle classes find the advertisements and articles about home decoration in magazines like House Beautiful or Better Homes and Gardens or in newspapers like the New York Times very useful ... advertising, along with the other content of the mass media, has an important role in socialising Americans in the ideas, norms, and emotions required for an open-class kind of society and for their class
Home magazines, heavily dependent on advertising, were obviously promoting forms of mass consumption and capital accumulation. However, a close reading of home magazines reveals they were also promoting ideas about everyday life which should not be reduced to the structural dynamics of capitalist expansion.

This paper qualifies the arguments presented by the above authors. It loosens the strings which either bind modernism to other key explanatory variables of post-war social transformation, or which view post-war home magazines as ideological conduits for mass consumerism. The promotion of modernism in home magazines was not solely a reflection of the needs of post-war capitalism or patriarchy. Post-war modernism was able to achieve an elevated status in architectural and design philosophy as a result of its proponents' promise that modernism was the most effective means of transcending the housing crisis affecting large sections of the population. Modernism was the magazine editors' response to what Soja has labelled the most modernist of modernist questions: 'What is to be done'?9 – in the context of the housing crisis.10

However, any evaluation of the post-war modernist vision is complicated by the different meanings which were attached to the concept by experts, positions within it." B. Barber, *Social Stratification*, New York, Harcourt Brace & World, 1957, pp. 296-7.

9 Modernism, according to Soja, encompasses "a heterogeneous array of subjective visions and strategic action programmes in art, literature, science, philosophy, and political practice which are unleashed by the disintegration of an inherited, established order and the awareness of the projected possibilities and perils of a restructured contemporary moment or conjuncture. Modernism is... a... social movement mobilised to face the challenging question of what now is to be done given that the context of the contemporary has significantly changed." E.W. Soja, *Post-modern Geographies*, London, Verso. 1989, 29).

10 Connell and Irving partially acknowledge the autonomy of modernism through referring to *Australian Home Beautiful* as "a conscious attempt to spread modernism in design". Connell & Irving, op. cit., p. 300.
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producers and consumers. For some, modernism was the application of the scientific method to the production and design of housing; some limited modernism to the application of prefabricated or industrial techniques and the use of more inanimate power; others viewed modernism as a temporary expediency for overcoming the acute housing shortages experienced in the wake of World War II; some saw it as the application of new materials and innovations to the traditional home; for others modernism retained the pre-war image of cosmopolitanism and all that was foreign; others saw modernism as the adaptation of housing to post-war lifestyles; and others simply saw it as a fashion choice, from which they could select what they liked. These meanings often conflicted and often contradicted one another. They were also subject to change as social, economic, technological and ideological circumstances dictated. Modernism remained a multifaceted, complex and dynamic concept.

After the war, the media, retailers and professional groups responded to the public’s demand for adequate shelter by involving themselves closely in issues of housing provision. Within this austere building climate, magazines frequently provided plans and advice on building materials, architecture and interior design to owner-builders and homemakers. It is within this context that modernism will be explored in this paper, focusing on one such magazine, Australian House and Garden, first published in December 1948 by K.G. Murray.

Textual analysis of this magazine will be divided into three parts. The first section sets the scene by providing some descriptions of modernism from key contributing writers to the magazine during the late 1940s and early

11 For example, In Victoria, the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects and the Age sponsored the Small Homes Service Victoria, providing architectural services to prospective housebuilders for a small fee. In 1953, the New South Wales chapter of the Australian Institute of Architects in association with Australian Home Beautiful and the Sun Herald opened a similar service called the Small Homes Service (NSW). Stock house plans could be viewed and obtained for a small fee from the venture’s shopfront in David Jones’ George Street store in Sydney. The Australian Women’s Weekly also established its own Home Plan Service in conjunction with a Melbourne architectural firm, Borland and Trewenack, with shopfronts throughout eastern Australia. See Architecture in Australia, June 1962.
1950s. These texts suggest that the modernist ideas promoted by the magazine were being met with a certain, if unquantifiable, amount of resistance among the readership. The second section links these modernist ideas with professional and expert self-advertising. In contrast, the third section demonstrates that, despite this editorial elitism, the magazine was responding to a set of pressing popular needs and material problems. This analysis demonstrates the multifaceted and complex nature of modernism – a feature often neglected in postmodern-inspired writing, which tends, ironically, to ‘totalise’ modernism.

3. KEEPING PACE WITH MODERNITY
During its formative years (1948-52) *Australian House and Garden* ceaselessly promoted the superiority of modernist design in a rather didactic effort to purge Australian homemakers of what was depicted as their 'stuffy' conservatism. The following texts represent a number of key techniques used by the magazine to raise modernist consciousness. These methods included 'personal assaults' designed to question one's modernity, holding earlier design and fashion up for ridicule through the mirror of modernism, and denigrating the Australian through the lens of the foreign, especially American.

Peggy Gaynor's June 1951 article entitled 'What Are We Doing To Our Homes?' used the second person and the first-person plural in order to argue that the time had finally arrived for her readers to reconsider their conservative attitudes towards house and interior design. All the evidence suggested that the majority of Australians failed to appreciate good design: 'We don't seem to have a national tendency for home planning or exploiting our natural advantages. Only encouragement of the men (sic) who do have this ability and appreciation will bring us even into line with building developments abroad.' The readership had failed to take advantage of the advice presented by experts: 'Despite articles and magazine pictures, have we learnt anything?...Why can't we bring a fresh approach into our own homes?...Personally, I think it's a lack of courage.' The attack then began to get personal: 'The other things you've read about dozens of times in this magazine or similar ones, aspect, furniture scale and arrangements aren't eyewash – they are worth considering if you want attractive rooms.'

Readers were then invited to peek through the cream-coloured lace curtain net into the average Australian sitting room: it contained a round coffee
table in front of the couch, a standard lamp, wedding silver perched on top of a china cabinet, the wedding clock in the middle of the mantelpiece with a glass vase at one end and a bevelled glass mirror above, chenille or velvet curtains with a cream-coloured net in between. The colour scheme was green or rust, blue and gold or fawn and brown. The scene became more cluttered as further ornamentation, children and money were accumulated. 'Do you recognise your room anywhere there?' asked Gaynor. 'If you do we don't condemn you for it. But don't you think it amazing that we can picture your room without knowing you, your interests, your likes and dislikes?...If our homes are dull and uninteresting – awful thought! we might be too.' She continued to admonish the reader:

...these have been harsh words – but they could be harsher. If they get you het up, then protest back. It will show that some of us, have been stirred out of the lethargy that is a killer of home planning progress. We have our feet planted in a new half-century. Are we as advanced in home planning? America, England, Europe have all made honest national attempts to build round the people's needs. But in Australia? No, we haven't.

This direct attack on the taste of the consumer also delivered a glancing blow at Australian furniture manufacturers and retailers who – with a few exceptions such as Namco, Kalmar and Snelling – remained tied to pre-war fashion concepts. However, a magazine which relied on advertising revenue from these sources could hardly mount a direct attack on their taste. The reader-as-consumer was regarded as sovereign, and therefore shouldered the responsibility for this dreadful state of aesthetic affairs.

This stance was also adopted by Frank Greenop in a March 1952 article entitled 'Have it modern – your way', in which he discussed the failure of retailers to stock adequate supplies of modern furniture. Once more, the blame lay at the feet of the public: 'If Australian tastes are conservative, or old-fashioned, or timid, or lacking in art and imagination, it is ultimately not because the store buyer has refused to take a risk, but because the purchaser has been too easily satisfied.' Adopting Gaynor's tactic of launching a personal assault on the aesthetic senses, he asked: 'Have you ever seriously asked yourself if you are conservative?' Too many people simply assumed that they were modern without looking for any evidence. For example, too many people were simply puzzled when confronted by new design and were unsure whether it was good or bad: 'Now that is no
way to get along and keep pace with modernity.' After they laid down their monthly copy of the magazine, the readers' own sense of the modern self must have been chronically deflated.

These examples reveal a distance between the writer and the reader which is rarely found within contemporary homes magazines. Most writers, furthermore, assumed that their readership was somewhat wary of modernism. In an October 1949 article, P. Hull attempted to allay these fears of the unknown by pointing to the historical precedents of 'functionalism and simplicity' in Australian history. The early pioneers 'were knocking up functional furniture from local timber that were the last word in simplicity'. However, this was usually a stop-gap until money and availability allowed them to live in a more familiar comfort reminiscent of England. Thankfully, fashion had burst out of the 'Victorian clutter' and the world of design had reverted to the catchcries of the pioneering days. Hull aimed at overcoming readers' wariness of modern design and its pre-war revolutionary connotations:

'Modern' became the starkly interesting word of the 1920's synonymous [sic] with bare walls, geometric lines and little comfort. During the 1930's the tubular steel chairs and futuristic furniture twisted themselves into shapes designed to fit the body, - revolutionary designs as well fitting but as uninspiring as surgical corsets. But after this 'modern adolescence' designers have evolved a maturity in furniture design that combines all the simplicity they strove for in the 20's with a beauty of style and line that was lacking then.

After the 'shock of the new' it was now safe to purchase these new 'domesticated' and 'unthreatening' modern products. In true Hegelian style, Hull believed that modernism would transcend the spirit of fashion. Proclaiming 'the end of furnishing history', he reassured his readers that if 'our modern outlook remains uncluttered and simple' then the cycle of fashion would grind to a halt. 'Furniture', he stated, 'is as indicative of a nation's moods and moments as the history that the nation makes'.

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12 Cuffley has also noted that functionalist architects during the 1950s announced the 'end of architecture' and were 'convinced that stylism was dead and that future generations would recognise their wisdom in this matter'. P. Cuffley, op. cit., p. 112.
In 'Don’t be afraid to be different' (September 1950) H. Dalton Clifford also adopted the technique of historical comparison in order to contrast pre-war conservatism with the modern outlook. This technique of 'constructive destruction' involved setting up a design stereotype popular with the previous generation and mercilessly pointing out its flaws in contrast to contemporary design – a technique adopted in the 1990s towards the 1970s.\textsuperscript{13} The benefits of the new beginning and modernity were regularly emphasised through holding up for ridicule the tastes of one's aunt or grandmother.

The object Clifford chose to highlight bad taste was the 'Californian bungalow' or the 'Model-Somewhere-Around-1926'. It was described as a 'nice' house, with a small square of well-kept lawn. It resembled other houses along the street, which were brick-clad with the bedrooms looking onto the street and a narrow, draughty hallway-entrance which served no useful function. While the front windows provided a pleasant appearance, the late afternoon sun made the front rooms hot and stuffy and the proximity to the street made them noisy. The faults multiplied, from the dining room which received the sun all day to the views into the neighbour's living room, from the lack of consideration of site and location to the dingy lounge – 'a musty, dim museum of a room'. The owner of this bungalow, so the story went, enjoyed looking over his fence at the Model 1950 which resembled a goldfish bowl, full of glass, yet without a window onto the street, without a proper hall, dining room or sleep-out. The owner of the 1926 bungalow was thankful for his conventional home and could not understand how 'the modems' next door manage to live in such a peculiar and unfamiliar abode. Furthermore, if Mr 1926 'built a house like That, what would the neighbours say?' Everything wrong with the pre-war residential environment was contained in the story; the primacy of ornamentation, conservatism bred through familiarity, thoughtless design which ignored function, and fear of neighbourly sanctions.

Clifford then examined the modern home through the practical lens of its modern-minded owner. Model 1950 was built for comfort and individuality. He replaced the tiny square of lawn with a flagged yard and

\textsuperscript{13} Anyone brought up wearing platform shoes and listening to T-Rex music will appreciate how cruel this technique can be!
substituted the backbreaking afternoons of weeding for a quick hose-down once a month. Blinds and curtains could be drawn over the large windows while still allowing a good view. The bedrooms at the back were protected from street noise, even though the house might 'look back-to-front'. The garage was located at the front of the block and this modern concept of 'space-saving' also allowed for a terrace which functioned as an open-air living room. Furthermore, Model 1950 abandoned the separate dining area 'which is a survival from the days when most sizeable households had at least one servant'. Space-saving also dictated the disappearance of the hall, the elimination of numerous walls and the sleep-out, while providing more built-in cupboards, cupboards forming partitions between rooms, and the grouping of plumbing. The 'goldfish bowl' was not cold in winter, because double glass and a sealed vacuum cavity between the panes provided the insulating value of brick: 'It's used a lot in America'. These historical contrasts between the new and the old were designed to illustrate and teach the difference between the functional and the ugly, the beauty of simplicity and the irrationality of the ornate, and the 'good' and the 'bad'.

A stuffy Edwardian or Victorian straw figure had been assembled and subsequently demolished by the confident polished glass and steel man of modernism.

Many feature articles were supported by stories of the experiences of post-war families. It mattered little whether these families were real or fictitious, although scepticism must have gradually grown among readers because during the late 1950s and early 1960s the magazine would stress that they were discussing an 'authentic family'. A typical theme was the story of the once-wary family which had successfully negotiated the difficult and uncharted path to modernity, and loved it. Frequently, stories provided glimpses of modern living in the United States or Canada. Better still, an American family – embodying all that was modern – could set up home in Australia. The Rose family ('Transformation Job', January 1952) arrived in Sydney to settle but were bitterly disappointed when they discovered that they would be unable to find a home 'with all the comfort and color' which characterised homes on the west coast of the USA. The shortage of building supplies and the general housing shortage forced them to 'accept a drab black-bricked house tucked away on the flats of an outer suburb of Sydney'. This house, 'one of the 1920s building era', was another much-maligned Californian bungalow. With their bright 'up-to-
the-minute' streamlined ideas imported from the USA, the Roses finally transformed their utterly, drab, stifling, depressing bungalow into a bright fresh home decorated with modern furniture – which Mrs Rose brought over from the United States. It was quite a battle for the couple as they were fighting material shortages and the conservatism of local tradesmen – some of whom refused to touch the job. By personifying imported modern ideas, the article made the Australian environment and attitude look even shabbier.14

While this section has portrayed the design philosophy promoted by the magazine and has attempted to outline the struggle which its authors’ felt they were conducting against the forces of reaction and ornamentation, the next two sections will examine the magazine’s responses or solutions to the reshaping of Australian housing provision in the wake of World War II.

4. WHAT IS TO BE DONE? – ASK AN EXPERT!

Although the tone of the magazine suggested that the general readership found it difficult to appreciate good design, this did not stop the dawn of modernism from rising. A range of experts that understood modernist design – such as architects, interior designers and furniture designers – were hailed as the agency of post-war change, struggling valiantly against popular conservatism. The feature stories within the magazine rarely missed an opportunity to advertise the virtues of such professionals and their modernist solutions. Using some above examples, the owner of ‘Model 1950’ in H. Dalton Clifford’s story ‘Don’t Be Afraid To Be Different’ first consulted an architect, recognising that this would eventually save him money because the architect’s life work is based on 'keeping abreast with the latest trends in planning, to study new materials, and domestic apparatus so that he can design a house for maximum comfort'. On the other hand the Roses, the American family in ‘Transformation Job’ who modernised their drab bungalow didn’t need an architect. Presumably, they were modern to the core. If the quintessential modernist question was ‘What is to be done?’ The answer was – ask an expert!

14 In the case of the Roses, the irony that a Californian family had destroyed a Californian bungalow appeared lost on the editors.
This 'vanguard' role of the architect was noted in a July 1949 article written by a young and optimistic Robin Boyd. He took a characteristic swipe at 'our house' which was 'in a rut' due to the fact that most examples had been 'designed by amateurs'. Boyd boasted that this era was passing and that the Victorian Small Homes Service – an architectural service introduced by the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects to bring good design within the reach of ordinary households – was penetrating and colonising the outer suburbs which had previously been almost the 'exclusive domain of the designer-builder' rather than the architect.

This promotion of the experts was a recurrent theme during the early years of the magazine. The author of 'Better Living in a Well Planned House' (June 1950) believed that most 'modern homemakers' were caught in a conflict with their own feelings. In contrast with modernist rationality (embodied in the expert), feelings were 'born of sentiment and prejudice' (and were carried by the general public). These articles reveal another side of the struggle between the ideas of the public and the ideas of the magazine experts, representing an attempted 'revolution from above and outside'.

Readers were occasionally offered compromises: 'No one would say you aren't entitled to charm and a house you may be proud of' but the plan had to take priority over the appearance. An open mind was advised because the old pre-war solutions to housing were no longer appropriate under post-war conditions and it fell upon the shoulders of the architect to discover new solutions. The consumer was advised to remain calm and retain confidence in the expert because the solution 'may involve materials, appearance, and room arrangement somewhat unfamiliar to you. Only if you keep an open mind towards the process, can your architect do the best for you'. An article in the August-September 1949 issue – unsigned – was entitled 'Be Kind To Your Architect'. In April 1952, E.M. Bernard wrote an article entitled: 'Help Your Architect Help You'.

Frank Greenop's article (cited earlier) also illustrates how modernism required the skilled touch of the expert. The first rule of modernity demanded 'complete harmony between furniture and furnishings and room

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15 Bernard informed his readers: “Don’t think, as some people do, that you have to bring [an architect] some sort of a plan. That is the last thing he will want. But do bring your spouse.”
Designing the 1950s House

decoration, so that the finished room is a neat, harmonious whole'. A 'good modern room' necessarily required some knowledge of 'modern things' and this explained the popularity of interior decorators and designers in the post-war period. The second rule was to shop around. This rule was especially important in the current building climate where a house could take up to a year to build. As the house came to completion stage, people had a tendency to be impatient and buy anything as long as they could move in. The best method was to look at all stores and make a catalogue of available items with the help of experts. However this 'doesn't mean that you are going to take whatever is dictated to you as modern whether you like it or not: but it does mean that you are going to buy what you like with the expert's guidance, and consequently you will be pleased and assured in what you do'. The third rule also involved guidance and professional advice through bringing in a designer or an architect 'so you know before you buy just what the finished result will be'. In an earlier article (November 1951), Greenop had also claimed that simplicity (the simplicity of glass, steel frames, polished wood and simple colours) 'makes the modern home' – despite the fact that this simplicity appeared to require the assistance of an awful lot of experts!

Furthermore, trying to 'get along and keep pace with modernity' meant that it was essential to keep up with the modernist expert – who could take some peculiar turns. In November 1949, Peggy Gaynor asked readers to reconsider wallpaper:

Exciting patterned wallpaper? Did you say no? Well, well, we thought you would. Aunt Minnie's faded gargoyles and sorry little nosegays trailing round the walls killed your interest dead. No wonder you kalsomined them over when you inherited the house. 'Clean modern walls for me', you said. Yet here we are to lure you back – to stripes and spots and polka dots, to flowers and leaves and landscape scenes and every other fantasy wallpaper designers can dream up. For despite your cry for the modern, you are really out of date.

Toeing the modernist line could be difficult! Consumers were told to 'Be smart, be modern, choose wallpaper' – and this authoritative statement was backed up by 'famous overseas designers'. In August 1951, readers were informed that dark walls were returning, but this time 'they have a modern interpretation that is dramatic and interesting'. It was unfortunate – readers were told – that for many people 'the thought of dark red or brown
walls conjures up a mid-Victorian atmosphere'. The writer never indicated where this perception might have come from!

By 1952 there were signs that 'the modern' was becoming more pervasive and acceptable. A survey conducted at the 1952 home exhibition held by the New South Wales Chapter of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects revealed that three-quarters of the visitors wanted a house that 'looked modern'. By September of the same year the *Australian House and Garden* could confidently state that the 'modern trend in home decoration has clearly influenced many practical home owners who now favour the utilitarian comfort of contemporary design to the more elaborate style of traditional decoration'. By May 1955, the magazine could publish an article on an eccentric man who 'lives with antiques – and loves it!' The modern house had secured its minimalist program.

The term 'modern' was used to catch the reader's eye, even if the advertisement had little to do with the concept. While the word 'modern' had always been a powerful phrase for the advertising industry, from around 1952 until the mid- to late 1950s it assumed a prominence which was unprecedented.

These texts from *Australian House and Garden* illustrate the very strong and unified position adopted in favour of modernist design. It promoted a range of experts and professionals and it looked beyond Australia towards the United States for assistance in the struggle against the conservatism of local tradition. The texts also betray a certain tension between the editorial line and popular taste, and a good deal of indirect criticism of many of the local manufacturers and retailers which formed the advertising basis for the magazine. However, as the 1950s progressed, the tone of the magazine became less didactic and it was assumed that readers had absorbed the mood of modernity.

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16 Cuffley, op. cit., p. 122. While, as Cuffley pointed out, there are problems with the representative nature of such a sample as it was possibly the more 'interested and better-informed' who attended, the sample also probably contained a higher proportion of the population seeking to build a house.
5. THE MODERN AS NECESSARY

Despite its editorial elitism and the professional self-advertising, the magazine sought to provide a realistic solution to pressing housing provision needs dictated by post-war social, economic, political and administrative changes. The magazine believed that traditional housing solutions were inadequate given the strains of the post-war crisis, claiming that the consumer could no longer 'cling to the past any more and get the best house for [his/her] money'. One commentator, in 'Outlook for Moderns' (October 1951), pointed out that house design had to be reconciled with social changes such as the 'lack of domestic help, the fact that money won’t buy half its pre-war value, that social life must necessarily be more informal'. Socio-economic circumstances dictated changes which emphasised function rather than fashion:

There is no doubt that the modern trend towards open planning is more than a fashion or a phase. Rising building costs and material shortages will continue to limit the size of our houses for many years to come, and unless we reduce the number of rooms by eliminating partitions between hall and living room, living room and dining room, dining room and kitchen, our houses will become too cramped and pokey to be habitable. We need spaciousness and airiness in Australian homes to suit our climate and our way of life. (May 1951)

Rising to meet these post-war challenges, the experts emphasised to their readers that a 'modern' house should be distinguished from simply a 'new' house. Concepts such as light, convenience and comfort which had become all-important in 'modern' house design were a response to 'real needs'. Building regulations combined with the 'general economic situation' led 'without question to the building of smaller homes' (October 1951).

The magazine emphasised that the small house did not necessarily imply the 'cramped house'. Architects – the scientists of enclosed space – were now capable of opening rooms before their clients' eyes with streamlined efficiency. Glass walls, split levels, dramatic use of colour and the placing of furnishings were only some of the concepts employed to conceive and create a feeling of spaciousness. Indeed, the small house heightened the importance of architectural advice.

While a distinction was made between past and present needs, a clear distinction was also drawn between future and current needs. The texts
Home Magazines and Modernist Dreams:

acknowledged that the aspiration of the average reader was still a three-bedroom house, with separate living and dining room. In September 1950 Birrell warned the reader that this aspiration remained beyond current means. For the foreseeable future, members of the public would have to suppress their pre-war expectations and wartime plans. Readers were encouraged to review their needs realistically and build a 'basic house'. Architects and writers in these early post-war magazines performed an important role channelling relative deprivation into spatially acceptable forms.

On the one hand, many of these experts recognised that this revised dream was a compromise for many consumers by stating that 'the role of dreamer must give way to that of practical philosopher, wherein we admit the need for compromise and confess that the "little house" of to-day is cut to fit the pocketbook and has no frills and ambitious folderols'. Artificial sweeteners were occasionally added, as suggested by the title of a November 1951 feature entitled 'Where Modern Means Beautiful'. On the other hand, the consumer's compromise often appeared as the victory of modernism - or at least as the architect's and interior designer's challenge! The minimum house might have been a product of the unforeseen and contingent socio-economic circumstances, but this provided the advocates of modernism with an unprecedented opportunity to display the practical virtues of their knowledge.

During the late 1940s and early 1950s, the majority of plans displayed in the magazine were variations on this 'minimum' or 'basic' dwelling. The functional home for the hard-pressed family or young worker dominated the architects' contributions. One typical story from 1951 ('One-room house from a two-room garage') told of Peter and Polly who had fled their inner-city flat and bought a block of parcelled land. There was a garage on the block which the enterprising couple - with the help, of course, of an interior and architectural design team - remodelled into a one-room house capable of future expansion. It is difficult to support an argument stating that the magazine was portraying a middle-class ideal during this period, or that it represented middle-class aspirations. It had its foundations firmly sunk into the soil of the very real housing crisis - a crisis which affected almost everyone. Up until the mid-1950s, the magazine conveyed more of a tone of austerity than affluence. In the March 1951 issue Gaynor stated:
Designing the 1950s House

You are the one who must adjust your thinking to this substitute dream house and decide whether his [the architect's] drafted plan is going to please you when its built. It's hard, for many of your cherished dreams have been wiped out with 'That's unobtainable at the present', or 'That would mean going over the price you want to pay'. 'You have to be thankful for anything nowadays' is poor compensation when a home is the one lifelong possession we really aim for.

The texts during this era were far more than advertisements for mass consumption. Most dealt with pressing issues surrounding housing, and reflected the problems many Australians were facing during the housing crisis. This concern was reflected in the numerous articles dealing with housing production – from advice for owner-builders, to practical information on the latest building materials and innovations. The magazine performed a far more important role in the production side of housing during the 1950s than after 1960. By the early 1960s, as owner-building declined and project building increased, home magazines also reflected this shift, and began to emphasise interior decoration more than building techniques. While interior design had always featured in earlier magazines, it became more prominent as the years progressed.

The articles were also supportive of pre-cut and prefabricated houses – not only as a means to 'offset the long lag in homebuilding' but also as tomorrow's 'efficient and economical' housing solution. Eva Buhrich (September 1952) defended prefabrication and contrasted the industrialised vision with the monotonous reality of pre-war hand-built suburbia. In a regimented manner, the pre-war bungalows stood side by side 'a dutiful six feet apart, not far enough to allow for any privacy, not close enough to form any sort of unit, but loudly proclaiming their differences which are for the most part quite superficial, [claiming] an individuality which they cannot hope to possess'. According to Buhrich, tomorrow's home would emphasise the virtues of simplicity and restraint including features such as simple roofs, simple floor plans, expanses of solid wall and large glass window walls. These features were more than the latest 'aesthetic whim'. They corresponded with the needs of modern living and there were technical developments capable of meeting these needs.

Thus, the magazine targeted a wide audience and reflected popular concerns over housing. There is only limited evidence that the magazine aimed to familiarise its readers with a 'middle-class' lifestyle. However, it
did tend to homogenise suburban life. For example, there was no indication in its pages that suburban life on Sydney's North Shore differed from that in the western suburbs, and feature houses were chosen disproportionately from areas such as Pennant Hills, St Ives, Roseville, Lindfield in Sydney and Balwyn or the Mornington Peninsula in Victoria. Yet, during the late 1940s and throughout the mid-1950s, the magazine was directed primarily at the consumer of the basic/small/minimum/little home. It reflected popular aspirations for decent shelter, rather than rising post-war aspirations for affluence. It is just as important to remember these unique and contingent austere post-war conditions as it is to remember that the nation was about to embark upon a quarter of a century of relative prosperity and affluence.

True to the idealism of much post-war modernism, it promoted a new style of living and a corresponding design which was supposed to reflect the mood of post-war modernity. However, it could also be claimed that the modernism promoted in the magazine was a means of channelling wartime dreams into feasible housebuilding and homemaking realities. In this limited metaphorical sense it can be argued that the magazine functioned as a safety valve which released some of the sense of housing deprivation experienced by post-war housing consumers by showing them how a small house could be made desirable – rather than a makeshift or compromise.

6. MODERNISM: RETREATING IN ORDER, OR THE RETREAT OF ORDER?

While the first section of this textual analysis illustrated what was being promoted by the magazines, the latter two sections have provided two explanations of why it was being promoted.

Promoters of modernism within a range of disciplines began the post-war era conscious of their avant-garde status, yet confident of their inevitable ascendancy. The challenges of post-war housing, the general economic climate, the housing shortages, the experience of post-war living and the forces of reason and progress would assure modernism its ultimate success. As a consequence, modernism often appeared to its supporters as the 'end of style' and modernist design was elevated to the status of a 'science'.

By the early 1960s modernism had retreated from its pre-eminent status among designers and was merely another choice of style available to the
Designing the 1950s House

homemaker. The heroic days of the late 1940s and early 1950s when conditions had forced the streams of modernism and modernity to flow together had all but passed. The 'end of fashion' had become merely the end of another fashion cycle. Between 1950 and 1960 the imperative in design had changed from 'I need' to 'I like'. In June 1950 a Kalmar Interiors advertisement asked the reader 'Do you need modern furniture?'. By 1955, it was assumed you wanted it. By 1960 it depended on your preference – Aberdeen Blinds were asking readers 'Which Design Is Yours?', featuring a range of different house styles.

This transformation in the tone and content of the magazine reflected the move away from linking austerity with function towards linking abundance with personal choice and desire. A more austere society was free of the temptations of featurism, while higher levels of affluence encouraged more conspicuous styles of consumption. The link between necessity and modernism had been broken and the advertising industry was quick to run with the tide of affluence. The scientific experiments with interior space which many post-war modernists had marketed tarred the modern house with the brush of a less prosperous era.

This paper has argued that the magazine targeted a wide – almost universal – audience and provided practical advice to deal with the climate of austerity. As the 1950s progressed, the texts also reflected the lifting of housing restrictions and the easing of the housing shortages. The tension between the magazine's philosophical aims and the readership which was so evident in the late 1940s and early 1950s could be felt less by the early 1960s as the magazine dropped its earlier manifest aim of dictating and transforming the tastes of the nation. It increasingly began to describe latest trends, and 'what we're doing to our homes' was presented in a very positive manner.

It was hardly surprising that Robin Boyd fired his most powerful volley against featurism, The Australian Ugliness, in 1960. The battle had clearly turned against his professional army of modernist experts as

modernism began to lose its appeal. By 1967, Boyd's bitterness had grown, and he described the post-war modernist enlightenment as a 'false dawn' and simply another decadal fashion shift.\textsuperscript{19}

Yet, perhaps Boyd had underestimated the impact of the design philosophy which he had been promoting ceaselessly since the war. Modernism, it could be argued, rose to the challenges presented by the unique and difficult material conditions of the early post-war period, and \textit{Australian House and Garden} helped marshal this effort. It can be argued that modernism was neither good nor bad but necessary, given the shortages of materials, space and labour. Without the post-war housing crisis it is uncertain whether modernist design would have achieved its pre-eminent status within the pages of the magazine. This status it achieved was a result of a variety of contingent circumstances rather than the unfolding of historical development – or science and rationality finally overcoming fashion and sentiment. Without these circumstances, many architects and other experts would not have experienced such a close encounter with popular concerns. What Boyd eventually resented was the fact that modernism had failed to impose itself on the entire built environment – that the unified, holistic sense of order which modernism sought and thought it required had failed to materialise.

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