

# BEAUMARIS MODERN

## MODERNIST HOMES IN BEAUMARIS

by Fiona Austin

*'Beaumaris has the greatest concentration of interesting houses in the metropolitan area'.*

— Royal Institute of Architects 'Guide to Victorian Architecture' written in 1956 for the occasion of the Olympic Games

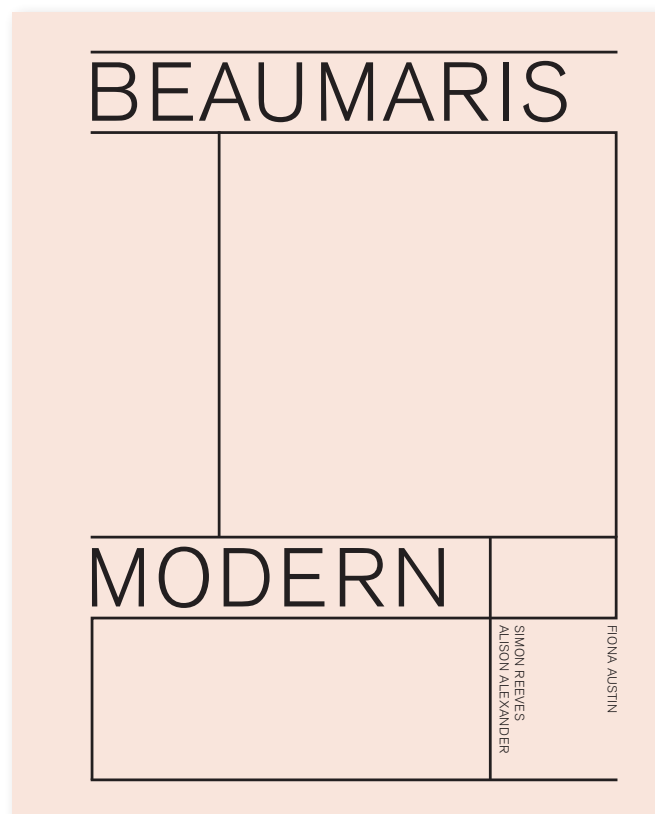
*Beaumaris Modern: Modernist Homes in Beaumaris* is a collection of mid-century modern Beaumaris houses, beautifully documented by Jack Shelton, a bayside local now living and working as a professional photographer in LA. Some are original in their design and are the architects' own homes from the 50s and 60s and other homes have been sensitively restored and renovated.

All the houses have a back story, fascinating interiors and architectural details, particularly the houses in which the owners have lived for over 60 years.

Each house features a history, written by Fiona Austin, a Beaumaris resident, interior designer and local Beaumaris heritage expert, and Alison Alexander, a Beaumaris mid-century home owner, writer, editor and daughter of prominent architect Ross Stahle, from the architectural practice Mockridge Stahle Mitchell. Each house includes a biography of the original architect, written by mid-century expert and architectural historian, Simon Reeves. A detailed floor plan also accompanies each house.

The foreword to the book has been written by Dr Philip Goad, Professor of Architecture and Deputy Dean in the Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning at the University of Melbourne, who grew up in Beaumaris in a mid-century home.

The book has been stunningly designed by dynamic graphic designer, Sean Hogan, and will fit comfortably amongst any collection of high quality architecture and design books.



### The Author

Fiona established Austin Design Associates 20 years ago. After completing her education in both fine art and design, she worked for several interior design magazines, including *Home Beautiful*, *The Period Home Renovator*, *Belle* and *The Age's* 'Home' section, while also practicing as an interior designer. Fiona's previous experience includes working as an interior designer with the Stonehenge Group before establishing her own design practice. She particularly enjoys the process of collaborating with her clients and with builders, cabinet makers, architects and building designers. Fiona also has a passion for 1950s and 60s architecture, particularly in Beaumaris. Fiona is a Fellow of the Design Institute of Australia and has been a member since 1983.

BROWNE  
HOUSE

ARCHITECT:  
ROBIN BOYD



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A BOYD HOUSE IN BEAUMARIS IS, UNFORTUNATELY, RARE THESE DAYS—BOYD DESIGNED MANY HOUSES, BUT MOST HAVE BEEN ALTERED BEYOND RECOGNITION. HOWEVER, THERE IS ONE ORIGINAL AND ARCHETYPAL EXAMPLE OF A BOYD HOUSE THAT REMAINS STANDING AND LARGELY INTACT.

A quiet and unassuming structure (as are many mid-century houses in Beaumaris), it belies the place that this home now occupies in Australian post-war modernist architectural history. This house, quite possibly, has the first 'window-wall' designed by Robin Boyd and manufactured by Brian Stegley, which is now famous.

Stegbar was founded in Melbourne in 1946 by Brian Stegley ('Steg') and George Barrow ('Bar'). The company originally manufactured clock cases and office furniture. Together with Boyd, they launched the window-wall in 1953 and, shortly after, the Browne house (or 'Stegley' house, as it was originally named) was designed to test the viability and potential for such a product on project homes.

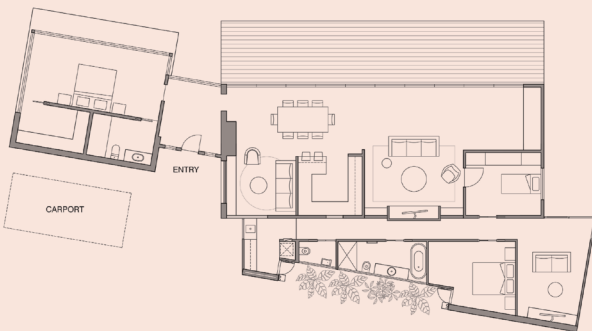
A key aspect of Boyd's design was that he deployed the timber stud frame as a self-contained structural device. He had removed every second stud and instead of noggings and diagonal bracing, the continuous horizontal transoms gave the frame its lateral stability and strength. The implication was that the walls could be prefabricated off site and that the specialist skills (and hence fees) of the window joiner could be dispensed with. Another aspect of Boyd's window-wall was its division into other elements. The division of the frame respected the idea of the conventional door and also the balustrade or chair rail. While the intention was to double the function of structure and glazing, the divisions of the frame meant that conventional relationships to the body and to other orthodox elements of architecture were in large part retained. (Goad, Philip, 'From Art to the Everyday: Robin Boyd and the "Windowwall"')

It was with the Windowwall that Boyd, more than any other single architect, gave our suburbs a distinctive look. Even Palladio couldn't do that. The Stegbar victory was his greatest triumph. His Windowwalls were an intrinsic look of the fifties. (Clerehan, Neil, 'The Age R/VA Small Homes Service' Transition 38).

The house was simply built and modest in size so that it would serve as a cost-effective option for a project home. The large window-wall stretched across the facade of the house, providing northern light to the living room, family room and bedroom. The service areas were kept to the south, including a smaller bedroom, bathroom and laundry.

To keep the house within a tight budget, the construction utilised timber framework and brick veneer. Circulation spaces were removed in favour of free-flowing open-plan living, with the architecture containing the most striking element of the house—the soaring window-wall. The pitched ceiling that follows the line of the window-wall fills the internal rooms with an incredible feeling of space and light and a strong connection to the garden. During its construction, the house was purchased by Alan and Rose Browne. There has been some confusion over the history of the house, which has now been clarified in research conducted by designer, Steven Coverdale. The Boyd Foundation refers to the house as 'The Stegley House' and in official records it is known as 'The McDonald House', named after the builder. However, it appears that the Brownes purchased the property while it was being built, as they have memories of being on site during construction. The current owners were told a story by the Browne family of Mrs Browne visiting the site during the build and finding Boyd walking around and Mrs Browne commenting that 'he had such soft hands'.

The house remained in the Browne family for many years, with Mrs Browne living there up until 10 years ago. Local real estate agent, Michael Cooney, has an interest in mid-century houses and, rather than see them demolished, works hard to save them by matching people looking for a mid-century property with those wanting to sell their mid-century home to a sympathetic buyer. The Brownes were in this very situation, with most agents only viewing the property in terms of land value. Cooney came to the rescue and introduced the current owners to the vendors. The Browne family, understanding the importance of the house, wanted to ensure it was kept in safe hands.



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Scion of an artistic and literary dynasty of painters, poets, potters and pen-pushers, Robin Gerard Penleigh Boyd (1919–1971) surprised few when he not only became one of the country's most lauded modernist architects, but also its most celebrated critic and chronicler of architectural matters. His path to glory followed the typical trajectory: full-time architectural studies at MTC, followed by night classes at Melbourne University Architectural Atelier, while working during the day for a city architect. Murmurs of brilliance swiftly began to spread. By 1939, Boyd had already designed a few small buildings (albeit for family members), co-founded the Victorian Architectural Students' Society and initiated its monthly broadsheet, *Smudges*, showcasing the incisive and playful prose that became his trademark. After serving in the war, Boyd entered into private practice with two ex-army colleagues. In 1947, he left the partnership to accept an offer to helm the Small Homes Service, newly inaugurated by the RVIA and *The Age*. The role was a perfect fit for a youngster with such prodigious creative and literary flair. The position afforded Boyd the opportunity to cultivate a range of standard house designs for mass consumption (many of his own design, others importuned from his vast network of professional chums) and to write a weekly newspaper column.

Warrandyte-born, Boyd spent most of the first four decades of his life in Melbourne's leafy inner-eastern suburbs. With an uncle who lived in Sandringham in the 1930s, he was aware of what was then the bucolic and sparsely-settled expanse of Beaumaris. As early as 1947, Boyd was cognisant of the area's advent as a seedbed for modernism. This became obvious when his first book, *Victorian Modern*, profiled a timber house that his friend Jim Spears designed for himself on Reid Street.

Two years later, Boyd discussed Beaumaris in his SHS column for the first time, codifying it as Melbourne's 'Cinderella suburb', a place that was 'young, beautiful and neglected by its council' (a sentiment that some may argue is still true today). Accompanying images not only included Spears's house, but also others that similarly evoked the 'unusual freshness and sunny simplicity'

designed by Alan Fildes, Lindsay Bunnett, Jeff Harding and Doug Shannon (the first two, like Spears, were residents themselves). Boyd went on to flag Beaumaris in his column semi-regularly, alluding to the suburb as 'one of our more progressive districts'; more detailed coverage of Lindsay Bunnett's own house on Lang Street; a threnody against wattle trees needlessly lopped in Surf Avenue. In Boyd's 1952 book, *Australia's Home*, Beaumaris was name-checked yet again as 'one of the few picturesque places near Melbourne with land available for building' and one latterly 'invaded by a new generation of architects'.

But while Boyd championed the work of his peers in Beaumaris, he was yet to design a house within the bounds of the 'Cinderella suburb' himself. By the early 1950s, the closest he had come was a modest dwelling in contiguous Mentone (1949) and another in Black Rock (1953). It was only later that year, after Boyd stood down as director of the SHS to enter into his celebrated (but volatile) partnership with Roy Grounds and Frederick Romberg, that Beaumaris finally beckoned. The mid-1950s saw a flurry of commissions for new dwellings in the area, including the Foy House on Deauville Street (1955), the Wood House on Cromer Road (1955), the Stegley/McDonald/Browne House on Dalgetty Road (1955) and the McManamny House on Haldane Street (1956). Boyd's local presence also resonated through the 'Peninsula' house (1955), a modest modular dwelling commissioned by Victoria's first project housing firm. Based in Beaumaris, the company erected its first six prototypes on blocks between Hotham Street and Balcombe Road, with at least a dozen further examples built in the area by private clients over the next few years.

Boyd's direct links with Beaumaris peaked in the mid-1950s; he undertook no further projects there during his final phase of professional practice as Romberg & Boyd. Still, he carried a torch for the suburb and in his best-known book, *The Australian Ugliness* (1982), drew attention to the area once more, lauding it as one of few remaining vestiges of Australian suburbia where 'trees prosper amongst the houses and a countrified air is not discouraged'.



ROBIN BOYD

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