

**robin boyd foundation**  
**public open day**  
**Courtyard Houses**  
**sunday 2 December 2012**

## **'Walsh Street' (Boyd House II)**

**Architects** Robin Boyd

**Address** 290 Walsh Street, South Yarra

**Completion** 1958



The Walsh Street house (also referred to as Boyd House II) is the second home Robin Boyd completed for his own family. A more ambitious project than the first, which clearly surpassed the expectations of residential design and continues to display Boyd's flair during the peak of his career. Here he demonstrated a conviction to the principles he championed in his seminal book 'The Australian Ugliness' which he was writing at the time of this project shape. A book which critiqued - among other aspects of design - the traditional suburban house which occupies the centre of the block, resulting in under-utilised land around the perimeter of the site. Walsh Street challenged this traditional model, making full use of the site by creating two distinct pavilions separated by a courtyard garden. Despite its age, it continues its role as an enlightening exemplar of residential design today.

At street level the scale of the two storey construction is somewhat diminished, and gives little indication of what lies beyond. Boyd has taken full advantage of the natural fall of the land with a minimal amount of excavation to allow entry from the first floor (at the rear of the site the natural fall of the land has been further utilised to allow a discreet undercroft parking area). Upon entry the muteness of the façade is instantly contrasted with light, space and a view of the master bedroom / sleeping mezzanine which projects out over the courtyard. In its original condition, the openness of this platform was further enhanced by the absence of external balustrades - these are later additions. Movement from the street through the house and into the garden is one of the most pleasurable aspects of this house to be enjoyed, as the fall of the roof draws the eye down toward the courtyard, allowing glimpses through the various levels and zones, to the children's pavilion and views to the city beyond. The openness and looseness of the spaces generate a sense of welcoming informality and comfort, which affords a high degree of flexibility for entertaining and the varying degrees of privacy necessary for day-to-day family life.

Looking up towards the timber ceiling, the roof seems to billow and rest lightly on catenary suspension cables - another example of the Boyd's deft hand and ingenuity. The thin profile is achieved by a layering of asphalt over felt and insulation board (caneite) on 25mm thick decking boards, which span between each 20mm tensioned steel cable. The apparent lightness of the roof is further exaggerated by hidden structural elements - 75mm steel columns are concealed within cavity brick walls. The structural idea here bears more similarity to the structural concept of the Sidney Myer Music Bowl than his more frequently used skillion roof, although the efficiency in design and honesty of expression are aspects which had emerged in prior work and can be noted throughout his body of work.

As is the case in many of Boyd's designs, the gesture of the roof is an important design element. At Walsh Street it is a device which unifies the otherwise distinct pavilion and courtyard components in such a way that even whilst enjoying the exposure of the courtyard, one still feels contained in an outdoor- room of sorts, with glazed walls rising up to meet it on all sides. Boyd's 'window-wall' is a consistent element in his design repertoire, which ensures that all areas it encloses receive great amounts of light, and in this instance they also enclose the garden. Although there is a minimal setback from the site boundary, these

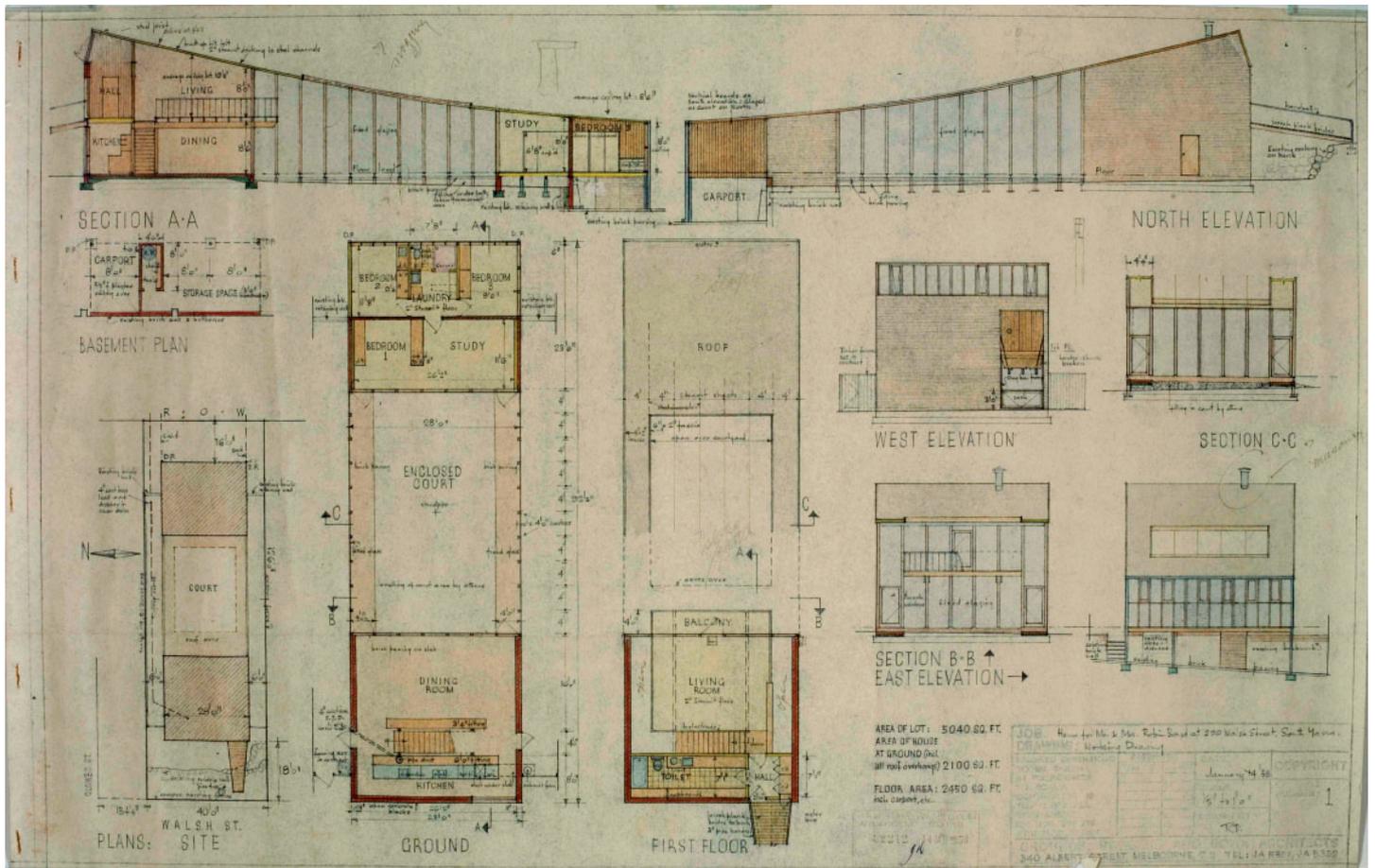
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large glazed walls essentially become the fence, a key design move that enhances privacy from neighbouring development - a common concern in residential design.

As the afternoon light spills in through west facing clerestory windows the dark rendered brick walls are painted with golden light, and under this tent-like structure it's not so hard to feel a little more connected to the natural world, despite it's urban setting. There is a simplicity and rawness, which is enhanced by borrowed views of the landscaping and vegetation in the courtyard, which seems to blur the defined spaces of indoor and outdoor. In all aspects of this house, Boyd displays a rigorous adherence to structural efficiency, without surpassing or undermining his more significant investment in material, formal and spatial poetics; a design language that demonstrates a high level of innovation, and honesty towards material and structural expression.

Walsh Street was bought from Robin Boyd's widow Patricia Davies by the Robin Boyd Foundation when it was first established in 2006. It is now the home of the foundation and is used as a venue for lectures, seminars and community education – continuing Boyd's work encouraging a better understanding of the benefits of good design. Walsh Street has barely changed since it was originally designed and still contains the Boyd's furniture, art works and books.

Text: Ben Sheridan 2012



working drawing