

David Yencken

*A Tale of Two Motels: the times, the architecture and the architects**

MY INTRODUCTION TO ARCHITECTURE and building was humble and accidental. I learnt about design and building from the good fortune of working with outstanding Australian designers and from the necessity of learning some building skills to bring into being the projects with which I was engaged. The first project was a motel in Bairnsdale. It was the great adventure of my life. From it every later initiative and role evolved.

As I travelled across Canada in my early twenties on my way to Australia, working my way to support myself, I was introduced to several wonders of the new world: hamburgers, three-minute carwashes and motels.

None of these now ubiquitous American cultural exports was in common currency at that time in England or Australia.

I landed in Sydney on 8 November 1954. A trip around Australia with a Canadian friend who had been at Cambridge with me and who turned up in Melbourne not long after my arrival introduced me to the delights of Australian country pubs – hammock beds and eggs for breakfast swimming in animal fat. It was during this trip that the idea of building a motel took shape, first as a joint venture with my friend and then, when he sensibly returned to Canada, on my own.

The omens for such a venture were not propitious. There were no motels in Australia, at least to my knowledge or that of anyone I knew. I did not have nearly enough money and nothing else to fall back on. My family read the omens very clearly and did their best to dissuade me. My mother wrote eloquently from England about white ants. My uncle took me aside in despairing resignation when I ran into him at the bottom of the stairs in his office to ask me whether I knew that asbestos cement was very cheap. But I did eventually begin and thus began my long experience with architecture and building and later planning and environmental conservation.

There were several false starts before I was properly under way. I ordered books on the planning and design of motels and read them carefully.¹ Two clear messages were that motels should be located on the outskirts of towns not in their centres and that would-be motel builders should beware of arterial or freeway bypasses. I looked at Albury/Wodonga on the Hume Highway, the main arterial road between Melbourne and Sydney, and, assuming that a bypass would be built within a few years, decided against a site on the existing road. It is somewhat ironic that it took another fifty years for the bypass to be built.

**This essay has been drawn from a longer version being published by Future Readers.*

After looking at other sites without success, I bought a site on the Princes Highway coming into Warrnambool. It was on a hill overlooking the racecourse. I let this land lie fallow while my attention was focused on a small art gallery called Brummels Gallery in Toorak Road, South Yarra. I opened the gallery in 1956 in partnership with Pat Collins, the owner of the coffee shop below the gallery. The gallery was devoted to Australian painting and at the time of its opening was one of only two with this focus in Melbourne. Although I didn't run the gallery for long, it was for me a significant experience because it gave me an introduction to a new world of painters and people associated with the arts in Australia.

During my time running the gallery, I continued to ponder what next to do with the Warrnambool land. Slowly it sank in that although the site was a lovely one it was on the wrong highway. But then out of the blue came a letter from the Catholic Monsignor in Warrnambool asking if I would sell my land. The subsequent exchange was conducted with the sweetest blarney I have ever heard. When I called in to see him he dragged me to my feet as he swept into the small antechamber where I was waiting: 'Mr Yencken, you will pardon my surprise. I was expecting to meet a businessman but not a gentleman too.' And then growing more expansive: 'Picture yourself, Mr Yencken, in years to come as you drive into Warrnambool, you will look up above you and see this fine Catholic edifice on the hill and your heart will swell with pride.' It was with difficulty that I avoided giving him the land. But eventually from this negotiation we all seemed to get what we wanted. The Monsignor got his land and I got a cheque that gave me the equity for the loan I needed to build a motel on a site I later bought in Bairnsdale.

When this Bairnsdale motel was completed in 1957 it was the first built in regional Victoria, the second built in Victoria, and one of the first built around Australia, all in the space of a year or two. Only three years earlier, in 1954, the American Motel in Bathurst, the first motel built in Australia, had opened its doors. None of us knew that the other motels were being conceived and built when we started. It was as if there was a common recognition that the time for motels had come.

There was indeed good reason for their coming. Once World War II was over, in Graeme Davison's words: 'all the pent up longings of the war years – sexual, scientific and material – were released'.² The car was a primary object of these postwar longings. It introduced new work and leisure opportunities. It offered the young freedoms of a previously unimaginable kind. New car makers started to manufacture cars in Australia, the most notable being General Motors which launched the Holden, 'Australia's own car', in November 1948. Models from other car makers and different versions of sedans, station wagons and sports cars soon appeared; car ownership postwar began to expand exponentially.

This was only a small part of the story. The Australian cityscape and landscape were reshaped by the car. Manifestations of this social change included the extensive spread and development of service stations, carwashes, shopping centres, large and small, and drive-in facilities of every kind led by the US McDonalds chain. The arrival of the car

led to enormous growth in road infrastructure. Freeways with their interchanges and flyovers covering huge areas were the dominant expression of this booming infrastructure growth. Growing car use was an important factor in increased urban sprawl.³

Not the least of the changes brought about by increasing car use was the arrival of the motel. Motels offered a number of advantages not enjoyed by country hotels such as en suite bathrooms and new and comfortable beds. The car was parked outside the guest room providing much greater convenience and security. The informality associated with motels had immediate appeal to Australians. There was also the potential, rarely realised, to do exciting things with their design.

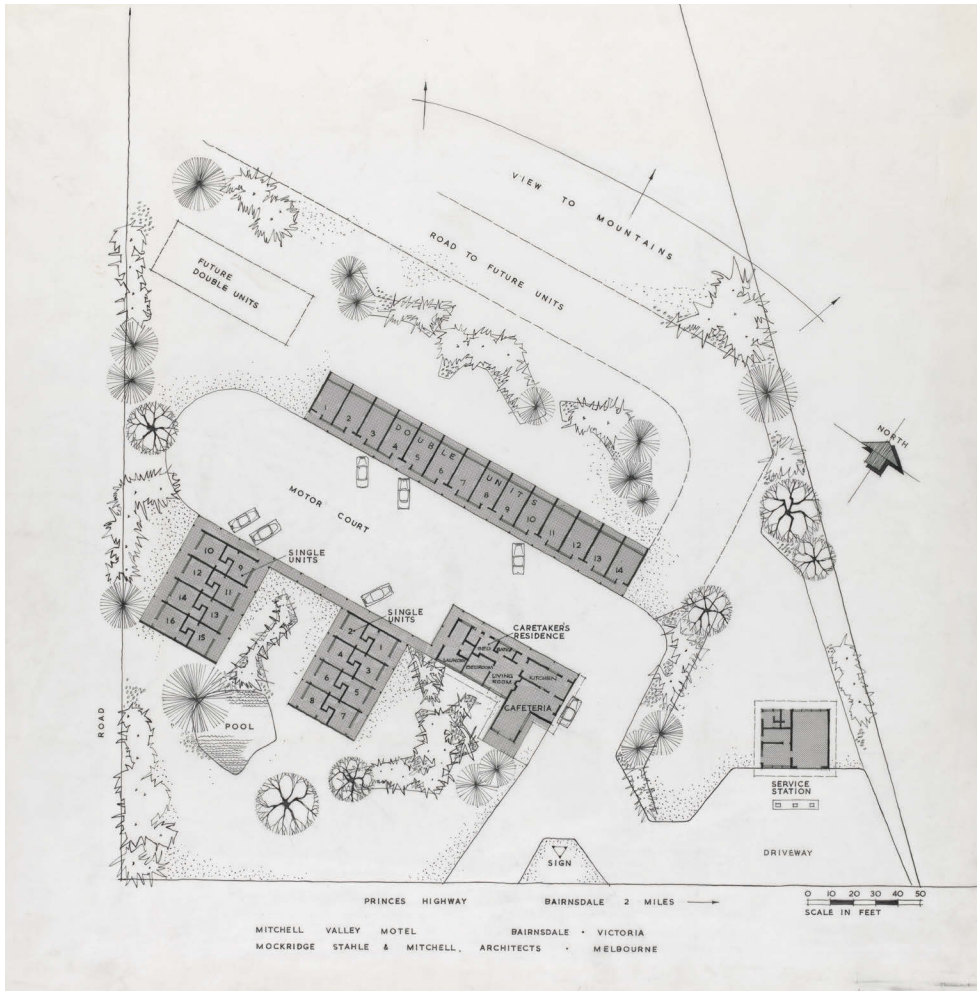
Building the Bairnsdale Motel and its Merimbula Successor

With the adventure of the Warrnambool land behind me, I turned my attention back to the main arterial roads between Melbourne and Sydney. I began to look at the Princes Highway, the alternative coastal road between Sydney and Melbourne. The two Victorian townships on the Princes Highway that seemed of greatest interest were Bairnsdale and Lakes Entrance since they were an appropriate distance away from Melbourne for those journeying to or coming from New South Wales and had other attractions. Bairnsdale was a commercial centre of some significance and was a connecting node for access to the Gippsland Lakes and Lakes Entrance was a major tourist centre in its own right. Since sites in Lakes Entrance were hard to find I focused my attention on Bairnsdale.

I was told to go and see Archie MacArthur, a public-spirited local patriarch. He helped me find a site, introduced me to a foreman who could supervise the building and later put a small amount of money into the motel. I was twenty-five years old when I first came to see him. I came with an English accent, and thus evidently without much knowledge of Australia. I had an outlandish idea and I had no experience whatsoever that fitted me for the task in front of me. He never once, even after he had become a small shareholder, seriously questioned what I was doing nor the decisions I made or wanted to make. He was just there when I needed help. He did something else. He made it perfectly clear that he wanted his pound of flesh, that his investment was not a loan nor a gift. In this way he put me on notice and, more importantly for our relationship, he never gave me the feeling of being patronised.

My formal education had left me marvelously ill-equipped for any practical tasks such as building a motel or running a business. I fortunately found a talented, helpful and tolerant architect, John Mockridge, a decent foreman and a fine crew of tradesmen. The architect and the foreman rarely agreed about anything – although they were very pleasant about their disagreements – and since the architect was in Melbourne and the building and the foreman in Bairnsdale there was plenty of room for creative tension.

Apart from running back and forth from Melbourne to Bairnsdale in the pull of these competing forces, I employed myself with the orders, and only slightly more productively worked as a labourer helping to make the concrete blocks. To save money



Mitchell Valley Motel, Princes Highway, Bairnsdale, Victoria. Collection of architectural and engineering drawings, Mockridge, Stahle, & Mitchell, Pictures Collection, State Library of Victoria [YLTAD16/38]

we made all the blocks for the motel walls by hand on the site. The day after we finished the last block a telegram arrived from the structural engineer, John Daley, demanding that we destroy the blocks and start again. After some impassioned exchanges he finally agreed that for simple motel walls the blocks would suffice. A similar encounter with the mechanical engineer, Cyril Jewell, left me with a rather jaundiced attitude to engineers. Engineers and cats. Local cats used to saunter across to the site in the evening and perch on the freshly turned out concrete blocks before they had properly set.

What was in my mind when first thinking about this motel and briefing the architect? Instinct played a large part. When asked this question at the time I can



John E. Jansson, photographer, [View from boundary fence of the exterior Mitchell Valley Motel Princes Highway Bairnsdale]. C. 1959. Pictures Collection, State Library of Victoria [H2013.188/7/2]

remember replying that I did what was intuitive to do. I didn't set out to build a motel aimed at well-heeled clients. Rather, I set out to build a motel as economically as possible and one that met my own feelings about taste, design and service. As to specifics, after reading the American books about motels I had formed clear views about the siting of buildings and layout of rooms. I showed this material to John; it largely formed his brief.

I called the motel the Mitchell Valley Motel since it was close to the Mitchell River flowing through Bairnsdale and had a nice sound to it. The motel when first completed had 14 double rooms and 8 single rooms and a building containing the reception area, the kitchen and the manager's flat. Two years after opening, I added another 8 single rooms. I also added a breakfast and tea room with a fireplace. There was no dining room or restaurant since we did not attempt to provide evening meals. The disposition of the buildings across the site is shown on the site plan opposite.

Robin Boyd, the well-known architect, visited the Bairnsdale motel and evidently liked what he saw. He contacted me and together we explored some emerging motel opportunities in Canberra. While they were much beyond my financial capacity to take

seriously, they helped me develop a close relationship with Boyd. Then, after the Mitchell Valley Motel had been running for a few years, a newly formed motel chain made an offer to buy the Bairnsdale motel. About the same time I was approached by three Melbourne businessmen, Alan Buchanan, Ken Stonier and Basil Hart who regularly stayed at the motel on their way to Merimbula where one or more of them had houses. Alan, Ken and Basil had an option on a large and attractive site that ran between the inlet and the surf beach at the southern entrance to Merimbula. I had thought Merimbula the most attractive coastal town that my Canadian friend and I had visited on our around Australia trip, so I was well primed to listen to any proposal. Their proposal, which was that I should become the managing director of and a significant shareholder in a company to build and run the motel, was attractive for another reason. The first motel had been built on a shoestring; during its construction I had lived the most frugal life imaginable. I liked the idea of going into a venture with seemingly well-off people who could share the financial burden. Later Arthur Kaine, a local saw miller also joined the board. His was a most valuable addition; he was a man of many parts.

Having learnt more about the quality of his work from my encounters with him, I recommended that Robin Boyd should be invited to be the architect for the motel. The brief I gave Robin was significantly based on key features of the Mitchell Valley Motel (such as the approach to site planning and room layouts) that I believed to be important to draw upon in this new context. For the Merimbula motel there were also additional elements needed, notably the restaurant and a full kitchen to support it. Perhaps the most important part of the brief was the approach to the situation and site of the motel. There was full agreement between us without much being said that the principal opportunity was to design a building that was an original and authentic response to an Australian environment. The mahogany gums (*Eucalyptus botryoides*), endemic to this coastal strip and widely distributed over the site, particularly offered scope to do this.

I was determined that the new motel should have a memorable name. The Mitchell Valley Motel was a nice name but unfortunately few people could ever remember it. Letters would arrive addressed to motels associated with the Murray Valley, the Latrobe Valley and sometimes river valleys even further afield. Thus the Black Dolphin was chosen after one of those interminable naming discussions. I recall that one of my older fellow directors suggested that it should be called the Gay Dolphin; he was somewhat taken back when I told him what that would imply.

The anticipated benefit of the partnership arrangements turned out to be an illusion. I was to find that, whatever the strains of working on my own, there were many more working with others. If there had been no problems the difficulties in the partnership might have been more quickly resolved. But there were indeed problems. The first was of my making. I had accepted the offer to become the managing director of the Merimbula motel on the understanding that I wished to go to Hong Kong and possibly China for six months to learn Chinese while the motel was being built. I undertook to choose the architect, oversee the designs, let the building contract, and appoint the

managers for the motel before I left. A loan was also arranged from a large financial institution. I left behind an able personal assistant in Anthea Stavely. At the time this seemed sufficient but as it turned out this was not the case. The second problem was that there was a flaw in the title. We knew about it but had been told by the solicitor on our board that the flaw posed little risk. What this advice failed to tell us was that a flaw in the title was likely to be looked upon by a potential lender in quite a different way. The third problem was that Australia experienced a credit squeeze in the latter part of 1960. Whether due to the flaw or the credit squeeze or more likely both, the institution that had agreed to provide a substantial loan backed out.

Money had to be found from somewhere to replace the planned borrowings. One of the shareholders put in a large part of the money. This immediately changed the relationships within the company. I also had to find additional money to match his contribution. While everyone was preoccupied with solving these problems little attention was paid to the running of the motel. When I arrived back in early February 1961 the motel had just had what should have been its most profitable month and had managed to make a loss.

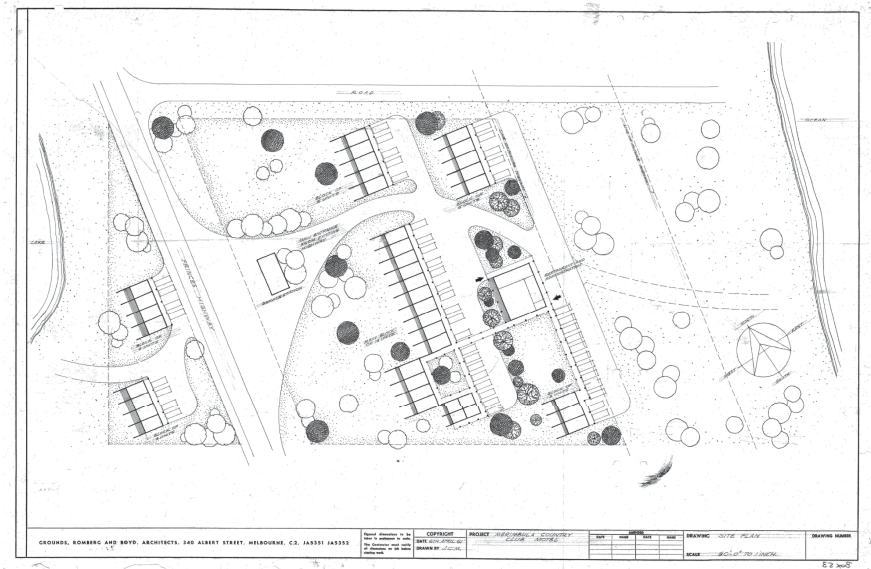
My careless overconfidence in rushing off to Hong Kong to learn Chinese and my folly in getting involved in a bistro in Hobart at the same time completed another part of my worldly education since both motel and bistro were teetering on the edge of bankruptcy when I returned to Australia. I took over the running of the motel and over the next year and a half worked harder than I have ever worked in my life to bring it back to profitability, finding a brief moment to get down to Hobart to try to set in place better procedures for the management of that business. Running a motel with a restaurant is a full-time business every day all day especially when it has to be done with minimal staff in a near bankruptcy situation. At the end of the two years I was more exhausted than I had ever been before or ever been since. Painful though these experiences were at the time I am nevertheless grateful for them.

When the first stage of the Black Dolphin was completed it consisted of a main two-storey building which housed on the ground floor a reception area, a manager's flat and initially a laundry, and on the upper floor the restaurant and kitchen. There were nineteen double rooms since there was less call for single rooms than there had been at the Mitchell Valley Motel and I had learnt from that experience that it was more flexible to build double rooms and house single travellers in them. When the motel was finally securely on its feet we added another five rooms. We also extended the main building, moved the reception area upstairs and expanded the restaurant space into a bar and sitting area which had a fireplace as a winter attraction. This allowed the manager's flat to be extended downstairs.

Despite the heavy financial cloud hanging over the motel, there were some wonderfully lighthearted moments. Getting staff for the motel in a very small community was always a problem; Merimbula was not much more than a small coastal village at the time. I hired a young Japanese woman. She was delightful and worked hard and



Black Dolphin Motel, perspective, drawn by Peter Little 1960. Designed by Robin Boyd (Grounds Romberg and Boyd). Robin Boyd Foundation Collection. Courtesy Robin Boyd Foundation.



Black Dolphin Motel site plan. Grounds, Romberg and Boyd Collection, State Library of Victoria, MS 13363, Box 53.



Robin Boyd, photographer, Black Dolphin Motel covered ways & main building, c.1961. Robin Boyd Foundation Collection. Courtesy Robin Boyd Foundation Collection.

effectively – when she was there. The problem was that she was not always there when she was supposed to be. Rather too regularly she would arrive too late to help with the delivery of the breakfasts, always a very busy time. I knew, however, that I had no more than a minute to be really cross with her. She would always arrive with a present. ‘Here is a cake I baked specially for you’ she would say with a beatific smile paying no attention whatsoever to my fury. It was always obvious that she had stopped at the bakery to buy something as she drove past. The explanations for her tardiness were equally outrageous. But she had such a way of making me feel complicit in her deceptions that after a while I would end up laughing.

In those first years there was not money to employ a properly trained chef so I had to use whatever local talent was available. I found a young man who had been trained as a baker in the navy to come and work in the kitchen. I had the notion that with him on staff it would be a great idea to make croissants and brioches for the motel guests. The problem was that he had never heard of them. There were no references to them in his naval baking manuals; the navy clearly had no truck with such Frankish fripperies. For my part having grown up in Europe I had eaten croissants and brioches on many occasions, knew what they should look and taste like but had no idea how to make



Robin Boyd, photographer, Black Dolphin Motel upper level buildings, c. 1961. Robin Boyd Foundation Collection. Courtesy Robin Boyd Foundation Collection.

them. So together we set out on this extraordinary enterprise. I should have kept all the different objects that emerged from the oven and donated them to a museum. The process was comparable to the story of evolution. With each try he got closer and closer. He eventually produced genuine croissants and brioches; it was a triumphal moment. It must have been, however, all too much for he left shortly afterwards.

Later during the time that I was associated with the Black Dolphin, I came up to Merimbula during the winter to relieve the manager and his wife who were on holiday. By this time the motel was running profitably and could afford professional managers and a talented chef. There were not many people staying in the place but among those who were there were several who were well known. After dinner about eight or so were sitting around the fire. I came up to them and, as I did, I heard one, a Professor of Engineering at the University of Melbourne, say to the others. 'This motel reminds me of a motel in Bairnsdale that I have stayed at several times. It was owned by a man called David Yencken who I know well'. He then turned to me and asked me: 'Do you know him?' 'Well, yes, I do', I replied after a moment, 'I know him very well indeed'. I have sometimes asked myself whether what I said was really true. At the time to save him embarrassment I took the professor aside and told him who I was.

Promotion of the Motels and Appreciation of the Design Ideas

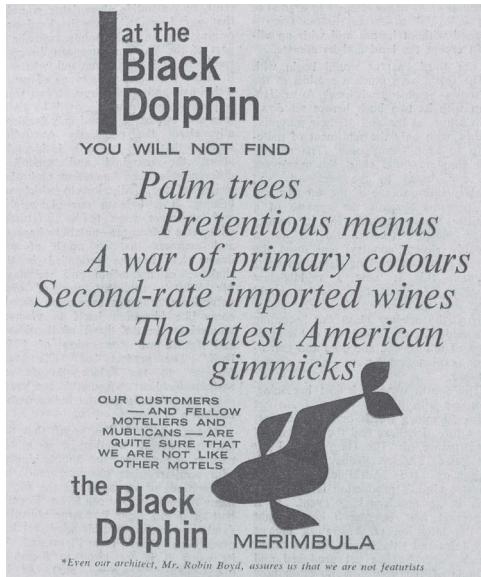
It was such an extraordinary relief to complete the building of the Mitchell Valley Motel within my available budget that I never had any serious fears that it would fail to attract sufficient guests to make it work. This was indeed the case. There was thus no need to set out on a major promotional campaign. There was no serious competition from hotels so it didn't take long for enough regular commercial visitors to shift their allegiances to the motel to keep it reasonably occupied right through the year. In the summer months tourists and travellers kept it full.

The situation with the Black Dolphin when I came back from Hong Kong and took over the running of the place was very different. The motel didn't have enough guests, it didn't appeal to many of the people who did initially come and many other influential people didn't like it.

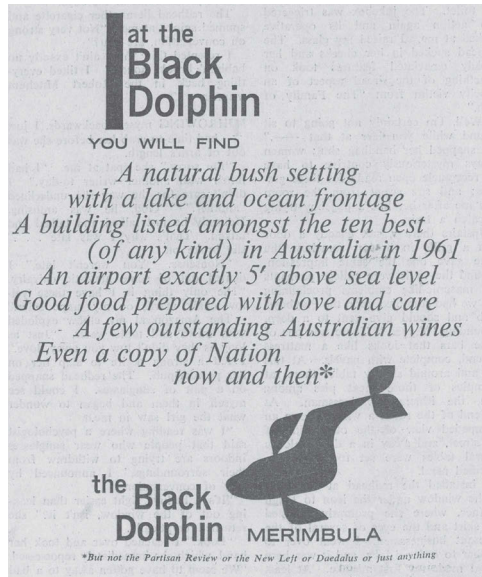
The first thing I had to do was to bring about a change in the attitudes of those who did come. I drafted a short piece, checked it with Robin and pinned it up on the back of every door. The piece described what the design was attempting to do: its relationship to its bush site, the easy spread of the buildings, the choice of the materials and the layout of the rooms. I said something about Robin Boyd, and I mentioned that the motel had been rated as one of the ten best buildings designed and built anywhere in Australia in 1960-1961.⁴ The effect was remarkable; it caused people to think carefully about their previous judgements. Several said to me words of the kind: 'When we first arrived we didn't like the place but now that we have been here for a few days we have found the setting and the design increasingly comfortable and relaxing.'

The next task was to attract more people. I prepared promotional material about the motel and took it on a whirlwind trip to tourist agencies in Canberra, Melbourne and Sydney. I can remember returning to the motel late in the evening. It was pouring with rain. There was not a single car and there were no guests staying in the building. On the recommendation of several friends, I asked John Handfield, who had a small but well known public relations and advertising business, to prepare some advertisements for the motel and to suggest their placement. I also asked him if he was interested in a campaign to get more people to use the Princes Highway rather than the Hume Highway. He set about this task with energy and purpose and would have been able to achieve much more if there had been greater support for the campaign from business enterprises that would have gained most from it. I in turn tried to get more political support for improvements to the highway. We held a protest meeting in Merimbula attended by local members of parliament. Jack Beale, later to become a minister in the New South Wales government and responsible for some forward looking environmental legislation, was one of them.

The advertisements for the motel were, however, a disaster. Their flavour was the romantic charm of prawning in the moonlight – suitable perhaps for tropical resorts but not for the Black Dolphin. They attracted no more than a handful of people. Worse, the few people who did come arrived with the wrong expectations and were as a



At the Black Dolphin you will not find.....:
Black Dolphin advertisement, *Nation*,
28 July 1962.



At the Black Dolphin you will find.....:
Black Dolphin advertisement, *Nation*,
25 August 1962

consequence bitterly disappointed. Something different was needed. At that time a small magazine called *Nation* had just come into being.⁵ It was devoted to politics, ideas and the arts. Advertising space in it was also cheap. I wrote some copy and sent the first two advertisements to Robin to see what he thought. He liked them and said ‘Yes, definitely go ahead’. Over the next two years or so I placed advertisements in *Nation* and then, as these began to have an impact, to widen the audience, placed two further series in the *Bulletin* (see accompanying illustrations).

Graeme Davison in *Car Wars* devotes a short section to motels and has two pages on the Mitchell Valley and Black Dolphin motels. He observes that the Black Dolphin advertisements ‘cleverly appealed to an intelligentsia newly awakened, largely thanks to Boyd, to the aesthetic sins of Austerica’. But he continues, ‘the advertisements highlight a division between Yencken and Boyd’s commercial and educative purposes. They had sought to elevate the general standard of architectural taste but they had concluded by reinforcing a division between elite and popular standards’.⁶ When basic survival is at stake, it is hard to think in these terms, but that apart, it is an interesting observation that has caused me to reflect on the diffusion of artistic and design ideas.

While Davison is right to infer that the Black Dolphin seems to have had little immediate influence on the popular design of other motels, there are important qualifications that need to be made. It is incorrect to say that the two motels did not

influence attitudes to Australian architecture. They were public buildings through which very many people passed. I have already described some of the changes in responses of guests as they spent time in the Black Dolphin and became immersed in the atmosphere created by its design. Both motels became well known. The Black Dolphin particularly achieved considerable fame. It was even used in government overseas trade promotions. These examples suggest that the motel in time made a real impact and not just with an elite intelligentsia. Even if it had only been an elite group at the beginning that is not inconsistent with the way in which new ideas are disseminated; innovation often requires adoption and promotion by an elite before it is brought into common currency.

The Architects and the Architecture

There were similarities and significant differences between the two motels. The professor of engineering who knew me so well was not wrong to have recognised the similarities. The internal layout of the rooms was similar. The main windows of the rooms faced away from the car park to look out over the garden and view with the shower room acting as a buffer between the car park and the main sleeping and living area. In both motels the buildings were spread over the site in a natural and harmonious manner. The overall architectural approach in each was distinctive of a modernist aesthetic.

Both John Mockridge and Robin Boyd, the designers of the two motels, were prominent practitioners in the postwar decades. John's work was a bridge between the architecture of Mewton and Grounds and Frederick Romberg and their peers in the thirties and that of the new generation of experimental architects.

Robin was the voice of his generation, eloquent, passionate and insistent. He was also one of the most prominent young architects experimenting with new materials



John Mockridge, photographer, unknown. Mockridge, Stahle and Mitchell Archive. Courtesy Alison Alexander.



Athol Shmith, photographer, Robin Boyd, May 1962. Robin Boyd Foundation Collection. Courtesy Australian Broadcasting Commission.



Mitchell Valley Motel: room interior with view to patio outside with lady on Featherstone chair and man on steamer chair. Pictures Collection, State Library of Victoria [H2013.188/10]. Photograph, Mark Strizic 1928-2012. Copyright, the Estate of the Artist.

and techniques. Some of the experimenters retired from the fray bruised from court cases over untried materials and techniques. There was a comparable problem at the Black Dolphin. A new form of roofing was specified. The manufacturers offered a long guarantee but guarantees have little value when the guarantors go into liquidation as happened with us.

John Mockridge and the Mitchell Valley Motel

John Mockridge was born in 1916. He was a brilliant student at the Gordon Institute in Geelong and the University of Melbourne. After World War II he worked for the Commonwealth Department of Works and then Buchan, Laird and Buchan before joining with Ross Stahle and George Mitchell in 1948 to form Mockridge, Stahle and Mitchell. John was the principal designer in the firm. By the time I met him he had designed many houses, several school buildings, a church and some small offices. The buildings that John showed me were the church in East Ivanhoe, the class room block on the Melbourne Grammar campus and a boat house for Melbourne Grammar on the banks of the Yarra. I thought the class room block a clever blending of contemporary



Mitchell Valley Motel: exterior view with lady in steamer chair on verandah. Pictures Collection, State Library of Victoria [H2013.188/7/2]. Photograph, Mark Strizic 1928-2012. Copyright, the Estate of the Artist.

architecture with the existing buildings on the site. I also liked the boat house which at the time received a deal of attention.

Philip Goad, the well known architectural historian, has told me that he considers John Mockridge to have been a pre-eminent architect of the 1940s and one of the outstanding designers of the 1950s. He has also observed that the work of Mockridge, Stahle and Mitchell has been significantly under-researched. A distinctive characteristic of Mockridge, Stahle and Mitchell's office was that the practice had on staff Beryl Mann, a capable landscape architect. Goad points out that even a very large office such as Bates, Smart and McCutcheon had no in-house landscape architect at the time.⁷

John told Goad and Athena Rozenberg that he liked to keep up to date with the best contemporary work but did not blindly follow the avant-garde. His design philosophy was that a building should fit into its environment but still have an identity of its own. Great emphasis should always be placed on the function of the building because architecture should be in the service of its users.⁸

The Mitchell Valley Motel was built on a flat site that had been cleared for grazing. Open fields stretched away from it leading across to a line of trees following the course of the Mitchell River and carrying the eye-line out to a range of hills in the background. The buildings were comfortably spread across the site. The materials followed a simple



Mitchell Valley Motel: night time exterior view showing monogram. Pictures Collection, State Library of Victoria [H2013.188/8]. Photograph, Mark Strizic 1928-2012. Copyright, the Estate of the Artist.

pattern. The concrete blocks that we laboured so hard to make were used for the party walls of the motel rooms to provide the best possible soundproofing. Vertical timber boarding was chosen for the external walls and window walls used for the rooms facing the garden and view. A heavily pigmented red timber stain was chosen for the external timber walls. The red when it was applied came out very strong and bright, but it nevertheless looked fresh and good. A white corrugated sheet was chosen for the roof.⁹

A striking feature of the design was its simplicity and elegance. An article in *Architecture and Arts* in October 1959 commented on the lack of ostentation and observed that good design with meticulous attention to detailing can provide a building at a highly competitive cost. It also commented on the motel's quiet and formal landscaping noting that this was 'probably the first motel which set out to provide a pleasant garden setting involving the planting of two to three hundred shrubs and trees and two acres of lawn'.¹⁰

The interior block walls of the motel units were all bagged and painted and the underside of the Stramit ceiling was also painted. In the words of *Art and Architecture* this 'provided a contrast of natural materials [which] together with the strong colours of the fabrics created an atmosphere of comfort and interest'.¹¹ Most of the room furniture, beds, tables and chairs came from Andersons furniture store since at about this time Bruce Anderson had introduced a section in the store devoted to modernist design. He had few competitors. It was easier to find attractive, colourful textiles for bed coverings

and curtains. The accompanying photographs give a good sense of the external treatment of the buildings and the character and feel of the rooms.

Beryl Mann produced an attractive landscape design using exotic plants. Although it would not be my preference today, it was not at all inappropriate for the site and the architecture of the buildings. The signs and key tags were designed by Mockridge, Stahle and Mitchell's office.

John was an ideal choice of architect for this first venture. Few architects are likely to face the task of designing a commercial building, albeit a very small one, for a twenty-five year old client who has no knowledge whatsoever of design and building and who is setting out with inadequate resources to build the buildings himself. John was very tolerant and helpful. He died in 1994. I am profoundly grateful to him and wish he was still alive to read these words.

Robin Boyd and the Black Dolphin Motel

Robin Boyd¹² was already a household name by the time I met him. He was born in 1919 so he was 38 years old at the time. Between 1954 and 1960 he designed some 63 houses of which 35 were built. I had seen two of those houses, one, the first of two houses designed for the Richardson family, built in the form of a bridge over a stream gully. The other was a project house designed for Contemporary Homes Pty Ltd in 1955–1956. I had first-hand knowledge of this house because my brother and sister-in-law owned one. He had also designed a window wall with clean contemporary lines for Stegbar in 1952–1953. This was a revolutionary piece of industrial design. Both motels were able to use them.

The volume and quality of Robin's writings even by 1959 were nothing short of extraordinary. He had started two magazines and edited others. By 1959 he had also published two books *Victorian Modern* and *Australia's Home* and very soon after I began to work with him he published *The Australian Ugliness*. He also contributed regularly to international architectural magazines.

He was a skilful writer with an effortless prose style, capable of writing in many different veins: sharp and confronting as propagandist, witty and entertaining as social critic and perceptive and informed as serious architectural critic. He was something altogether rare: a talented designer, an architectural critic of international standing and a publicist, social critic and passionate reformer. These multiple roles did affect his work as a designer. The issue was not his design skills as the Black Dolphin demonstrated; it was rather the undivided focus needed to get and carry out large-scale work. His writings also affected the way that he was perceived by potential clients. He also accepted architectural briefs, some of which it would have been better to have declined, because so few were coming his way.

Could Robin have been a great designer of major buildings and a great architectural critic at one and the same time? I am not so sure; it would have been an extraordinary achievement. None of these reflections diminish Robin's achievements. They were heroic.



Dining Room of the Black Dolphin Motel. Pictures Collection, State Library of Victoria [H2011.55/2057]. Photograph, Mark Strizic 1928-2012. Copyright, the Estate of the Artist.

Robin was very quick to make decisions and very organised. He needed to be. To do so many things simultaneously required great discipline. My only quibble was that sometimes a decision was made a little too quickly. But instances of this kind at the Black Dolphin were few and far between. As a person, he had a reserve about him that was not always easy to penetrate, especially for someone twelve years younger. Nevertheless, I found him excellent to work with and he in turn was very generous about our client/architect relationship.¹³

The Black Dolphin site was on the edge of an inlet, although separated from it by a main road. It also at the time extended back to a surf beach behind the motel although the relationship with the beach was not immediately apparent. There had been some clearing on the site but native vegetation remained, notably the mahogany gums. The essence of the design was its response to the site and the conscious attempt to design a building that related to an Australian environment. At one point early in the design Robin looked at a group of mahogany gums and saw the opportunity to retain the trees, contain them in a small courtyard and, in his words, add a little geometry to the layout. The colonnades for the walkways and the uprights for the main two-storey reception

and restaurant building were peeled tree trunks, a local red brick was used and the stains used sought to achieve a naturally weathered timber look.

Once again I used Bruce Anderson as the main source of furnishings. By this time he had developed much stronger contacts in Japan. He showed me illustrations of chairs and tables some that I thought would be perfect for the restaurant/dining room. He then arranged to import them for me. Marion Hall Best in Sydney, famous for her introduction of Finnish Marimekko designs to Australia, had Indian cottons in bright colours that we used for bedspreads. I also looked widely for distinctive well designed glassware, cutlery and crockery. All selections were shown to Robin. He wrote several times to say how pleased he was with them.¹⁴

The view – all the motel rooms had views over the inlet – and the mahogany gums and grassy sward gave such a strong character to the site that it was possible to rely on them for the main landscape treatment. Any additional planting that was done was exclusively with native species. Later Gordon Ford did some work. A graphic designer, Max Robinson, recommended by Robin, designed the logo. It certainly had strong graphic qualities but took some liberties with the shape of a dolphin. Matcham Skipper, the Montsalvat jeweller, challenged me about the design. He showed me several graphic representations of dolphins including medallions from ancient Greece. I discussed the logo with Robin who did not seem concerned. In hindsight I think Matcham was right; we should have scrapped the logo and started again. An outstanding choice as photographer was that of Mark Strizic.

The Victorian Heritage Database listing of the Mitchell Valley Motel notes the influence of the design of the motel on the design for the Black Dolphin Motel. It also says of the Black Dolphin that it was *the most significant motel building in Australia* (my italics). One can say much more; the Black Dolphin came increasingly to be recognised as an original and highly significant architectural response to the native environment.

Robin was a principal of Grounds, Romberg and Boyd, all very talented designers. The practice had all but disintegrated at the time he was working on the Black Dolphin and would soon be formally terminated. The main cause was Roy Grounds's commission for the Victorian Arts Centre and the personal way in which he chose to accept it. This caused great tension and anger within the firm. Grounds, despite his strained relationship with his former partner, was quick to praise the quality of the Black Dolphin's architecture. He came into the motel when I was there, walked around, went upstairs, came down, thumped the desk, asked for a telephone and dictated a telegram to Robin: 'Congratulations. The best thing you have ever done'. The dining room especially caught his attention. 'One of the most beautiful rooms I have ever seen', he said to me. It was indeed a beautiful room. Its exposed timber beams gave the room strength of structure and warmth of atmosphere. There was the sparseness and simplicity of traditional Japanese architecture in its overall treatment.

There were other memorable comments about the building. David Saunders, then a senior lecturer at the architecture school at the University of Melbourne and later Professor of Architecture at Adelaide University, brought a group of architectural students to the motel. 'Well' he said after the tour of inspection had finished, 'What do you all think of the design?' One young woman, after hesitating a moment, said: 'I like the buildings but I think the tree trunks are rather over-designed'. David Saunders walked up to one of the poles and wrapped his arms around it. 'Dear God' he said looking to the skies, 'please don't do it again.'

When it became clear that Ansett Hotels, the company that had bought the Black Dolphin from us in 1965, was not going to employ Robin for its intended extensions, I wrote to protest. I also wrote an opinion piece for the *Canberra Times* which was not published. In it I described an improbable night drive with Robin from Cooma to Merimbula, architect at the helm. When we reached Merimbula we walked onto the site in the dark. Work has just begun. Robin trod in a batch of newly poured concrete. I said in my opinion piece that I hoped in years to come that this footprint would not be the only authentic mark of Robin Boyd's involvement with the Black Dolphin. Sadly that fear has turned out to be all too well justified.

A Concluding Comment

The design, environmental and other lessons learnt from the two motels have shaped and influenced my career and enriched my life. The lessons were first applied in a new housing venture, Merchant Builders, with John Ridge as my partner and a string of very fine designers: Graeme Gunn as principal architect, Ellis Stones as initial landscape architect, Weatherhead and Stitt as graphic designers and Janne Faulkner as interior designer working for us. The bringing into being of Tract Consultants landscape architects and urban and regional planners added another fine group of skilled people to this team.

I was next drawn into national natural and cultural heritage programs as the inaugural chair of the Australian Heritage Commission and then back to other aspects of planning, design and the environment as the head of the Ministry of Planning and Environment in Victoria. From there I moved to the University of Melbourne as a professor in the Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning and head of the School of Environmental Planning. Finally in retirement, as the president and later patron of the Australian Conservation Foundation and the founding chair of the Australian Collaboration, a small collective of leading national community organisations, I maintained and expanded further these same interests.

The impetus for all these lifelong engagements came directly from those early motel years. I am profoundly grateful for the experience.