

Relaxed and Comfortable: The Australian Pavilion at Expo '67

Carolyn Barnes, Barbara Hall
and Simon Jackson

Expo '67, Montreal, was the first international exhibition Australia had attended since the 1939 New York World's Fair. In New York, Australia promoted its export industries in timber and wool in an annex next to the British pavilion. In Montreal, Australia contributed its own major pavilion, a simple, rectangular box of glass and steel. Inside, the pavilion contained few actual exhibits. The main feature of its spacious interior was a salon-style arrangement of two hundred and forty lounge chairs created by the Australian designers Grant and Mary Featherston from an idea by the exhibit designer Robin Boyd. Visitors sat in the chairs to activate short, taped interviews with prominent Australians on aspects of Australian life and achievement, delivered through stereophonic speakers in the chairs' headrests. Occasional tables stood nearby, bearing books on Australian society and ashtrays of a modern Australian design. One wall of the main exhibition hall featured a row of modernist paintings by leading Australian artists. Natural light streamed into the pavilion through its glazed north and south faces, which provided sweeping views across the exhibition site. Quality Australian wool carpet covered the pavilion's floors and some internal walls, muffling incoming noise and adding to the general feeling of repose.

Aspects of the pavilion's interior suggest a range of architectural types: a hotel lobby, a corporate foyer, a gallery of modern art, and the living room of a large, modern home. The priority of modern design over specific symbols of Australian nationhood was unprecedented, its origin was in the government's newfound eagerness to stress Australia's modernization. Such progress was emphasized in Prime Minister Harold Holt's four-minute interview on industrialization as a significant but little known feature of contemporary Australia. When questioned on the scale of Australian manufacturing in comparison to its more familiar rural sector, Holt described employment in industry as roughly equivalent to the USA, and higher than other recognized industrial nations such as Canada, France, and Japan.¹ He identified Australia's automobile, electrical, engineering, petroleum, mining, and steel industries as all experiencing rapid growth since 1939, and being "much more advanced and sophisticated than most people would realize."²

The Prime Minister highlighted Australian inventions such as transistorized aviation beacons, radio telephone equipment, a

1 "Expo 67 Sound Chair Scripts. Notes for Interview with Prime Minister—Final Reading Text," undated, National Archives of Australia (NAA): A463/1966/2141: 1.

2 *Ibid.*, 3.



Figure 1 (left)
1 Hostess with model of the Parkes Radio Telescope, Australian Pavilion, Expo '67, Montreal, NAA: AA1982/206, 44. Reproduced with permission of the National Archives of Australia.



Figure 2 (right)
Interior view of main exhibition hall, Australian Pavilion, Expo'67. Montreal, NAA: AA1982/206, 45. Reproduced with permission of the National Archives of Australia.

pilotless jet aircraft, and antitank and antisubmarine guided weapon systems as evidence of Australia's production of items "associated only with the most highly developed industrial economies," noting that all had been sold overseas, including to Britain and the United States.³ He made reference to the Woomera rocket range where, in 1967, Australian scientists and engineers were collaborating with Britons on new missile technology. Large-scale models of the Parkes radio telescope and the Snowy Mountains hydroelectric scheme supported the idea of Australian technological advance (Figure 1). The majority of the "facts" on Australian industrial, scientific, and social development, however, were delivered aurally, through the Featherston "sound chairs." Sir Valston Hancock, Australian Commissioner-General of the Australian Exhibit Organization (AEO) for Expo '67, saw the chairs as the most important medium for telling the Australian story.⁴ Yet, as Robin Boyd explained in a press interview, they told this story "quietly" once the visitor "sank down to take his ease" (Figure 2).

The pavilion associated Australian modernity with a particular quality of life and subjective experience invested via design in the embodied relations, material presences, object forms, and high level of comfort throughout the pavilion. While wanting to appear modern, apprehension about how Australia would measure up internationally made the government choose to present a small, appealing target, harnessing professional designers' fundamental investment in modernist style. An outdoor enclosure of kangaroos, wallabies, and eucalyptus trees, and some indigenous bark paintings and "sunburned country" photographic images inside the pavilion provided visitors with more familiar Australian content, but as a promotion of Australia, the pavilion's overall message was oblique, its modernist styling seemingly contradicting the expression of a

3 Ibid.
4 Correspondence of Sir Valston Hancock to Robin Boyd, July 28, 1967, Grounds, Romberg, Boyd Records, State Library of Victoria (hereafter GRB), Box 87/1 (d).
5 T. C. Bray, "Expo 67—The Greatest Show on Earth," *The Courier Mail* (July 21, 1967): 2.

distinctive national identity. For the exhibits designer, Robin Boyd, giving expression to Australia through modernism represented his aspiration for Australian society, continuing a lifetime's advocacy of modern design. The pavilion was a product of his experience in producing a totally designed environment, and highlights the emerging role of professional design services in Australia in managing corporate and institutional identity and public opinion.

Australia, International Exhibitions and Modernity

As a British settler society, Australia is clearly a product of the European modernizing project, but Australian history reveals complex, conflicted relations with the "molder." Perceiving itself as a "young" nation remote from European civilization, the prospect of attendance at international exhibitions often sparked Australian defensiveness about its place in the world. For much of the twentieth century, Australia was a sporadic and reluctant participant at official international exhibitions, favoring events linked to Britain's imperial ambit. When it did attend, its emphasis was on staple goods and nature, and pastoral imagery consciously divergent from other nation's exhibitions promoting human progress in industrial modernity. Within Australia, the emphasis on abstraction and universality in modern art and design was seen as opposed to an authentic Australian experience, and an unwelcome manifestation of the alienating effects of European modernity. The image of a country with unique plants and animals, and robust rural traditions and industries, suited Australia's largely complementary economic relationship with Great Britain. Until the mid-1960s, Britain was the main market for Australia's principal exports of food and natural resources, and its chief source of low-cost manufactures and investment funds. But Britain's first, unsuccessful application to join the European Economic Community (1961–1963) signaled a permanent change in the actual and sentimental relations between the two nations. Australia's increasing exposure to world economics and politics created a unique context for consideration of Canada's invitation to exhibit at Expo '67.

Australian Participation in Expo '67

The Australian government received the first of five invitations to Expo '67 in January 1963, but did not actually commit to participation until July 1965, making it one of the last participating nations to respond. The deliberations involved diplomats, cabinet ministers, and senior public servants from the departments of External Affairs, National Development, Trade and Industry, Treasury, the Prime Minister's Department, and the News and Information Bureau. The protracted and equivocating nature of the discussions reflected deep-rooted Australian reservations about the cultural orientation of international exhibitions. Australia did not attend the 1958 Brussels international exhibition: the government was unwilling to bear

the expense when it could not see any direct potential for trade promotion.⁶ But then Australia also stayed away from the 1964 New York World's Fair, claiming that event was compromised by commercialism and its lack of official status.⁷ Some parties to the discussions surrounding Expo '67 now criticized these decisions as lost opportunities to promote Australia internationally, and probably a justified expense. Even so, in June and December 1964, the Australian Cabinet twice formally declined Canada's invitation, the Department of Trade and Industry maintaining the estimated £1 million price was too high since most visitors would come from northeast America, considered an inconsequential destination for Australian exports given previous performance.⁸

Australia's reluctance to attend Montreal also reflected doubts over its capacity to present a pavilion with the necessary attractions and disposition to attract the attention of other nations. It was regarded as inevitable that the British and United States pavilions would eclipse any Australian exhibit. An official from the Australian News and Information Bureau claimed, "Our very normality is against us."⁹ The Canadian Government, however, continued to pressure Australia to attend, Australia ultimately feeling obliged to support Canada, a fellow member of the old British Commonwealth," especially when Expo was being staged to mark the 100th anniversary of the Canadian Confederation. With other Commonwealth countries including Britain, India, and Pakistan accepting Canada's invitation, it became virtually impossible for Australia to stay away.

The Canadian Universal and International Exhibition, Montreal, 1967

Developed around the theme "Man and His World," Expo '67 attributed an essential, eternal, and universal form to humanity, describing "Man" as "fundamentally the same... throughout the world and through centuries of time."¹⁰ Essential man was characterized as a "stubborn visionary," a "dedicated craftsman," "producer," "explorer," and "developer."¹¹ Design figured largely in the expression of these qualities, a press release asserting, "The ingenuity and originality of participating nations will tell the theme story in a kaleidoscope of architectural genius. Each nation will present its most precious contribution to the wealth of Man's civilization."¹² Such aspirations sought to restore a sense of idealism to international exhibitions. This was in contrast to the widely perceived disappointment of the 1964 New York World's Fair. Australia's exhibit designer Robin Boyd had himself written a lengthy, considered critique of the New York World's Fair for *The Australian* newspaper, which addressed its lack of a coordinated vision and rampant commercialism¹³ though, as Roland Marchand has argued, the event in fact highlighted the rise of the corporation in the international economy.¹⁴

6 "Minutes of Interdepartmental Meeting to Discuss Australian Participation in the Montreal World Fair," February 27, 1964, NAA: A1838, 563/3/2/1 Part 1: 1.

7 "Minutes of Interdepartmental Meeting": 1.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., 1–2.

10 Author unknown, *Man and His World: The Canadian Universal and International Exhibition* (Montreal: Canadian Corporation for the 1967 World Exhibition, 1967), 4.

11 Ibid., 4.

12 "News Release from the Canadian Corporation for the 1967 World Exhibition," NAA: A1838, 563/3/2/1 Part 1, undated: 1.

13 Robin Boyd, "The Fair That Never Was," *The Australian* (July 27, 1964): 9.

In contrast, Expo '67 sought to raise important ideas about the built environment, and to initiate a dialogue about innovative living spaces, transport systems, and urban planning.¹⁵ To this end, a highly anticipated feature of the event was Habitat 67, to be designed by the Israeli architect Moshe Safdie to exemplify the exhibition's sub-theme of "Man and His Community." Habitat 67 was conceived to be an ultramodern housing complex providing a new high-density, residential area for Montreal post-Expo. Like the exhibition site itself, which was largely located on recovered and man-made islands in the St. Lawrence River, Habitat 67 was intended to complement Montreal's new urban plan and underground rail system developed by the international architects Vincent Ponte and IM Pei.

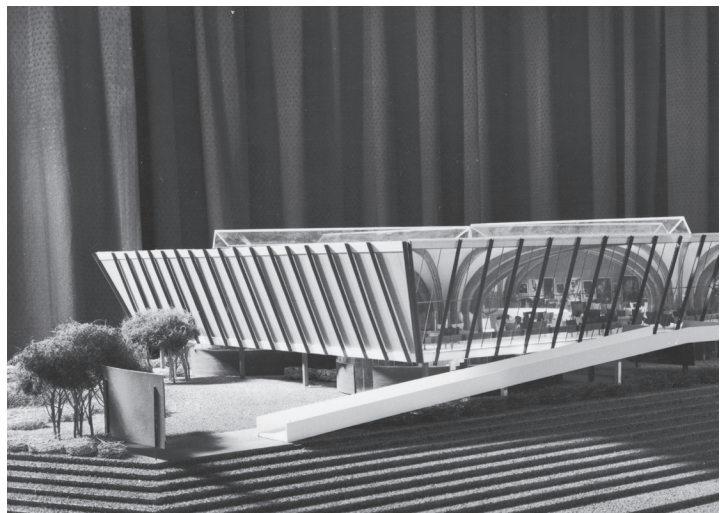
The Australian Pavilion: An Incidental Architecture

When the Australian government finally committed to exhibit in Montreal, it resolved to put sufficient financial resources into the project to make it an effective international promotion. Expo '67 also now was framed as an important symbolic undertaking for the Australian nation. R. Neil Truscott of the Department of External Affairs described it as "a valuable exercise in working out a composite image of Australia."¹⁶ The challenge and subtlety of this task were not ignored. A memorandum from Australia's High Commission in Canada reminded all involved that Expo '67 was "not a 'trade fair,' and that participation cannot be expected to show short-term benefits of a commercial nature," being "primarily a prestige and cultural exhibition."¹⁷ However, a year and a half of government indecision over whether to attend now required swift decisions to be made about the design of the pavilion if the building were to be completed on time, making a number of decisions somewhat impromptu.

For example, the important role of Pavilion Architect fell to James Maccormick as a result of his position as Principal Architect for

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- 14 Roland Marchand, "The Designers Go to the Fair, I: Walter Dorwin Teague and the Professionalization of Corporate Industrial Exhibits, 1933–1940" in Dennis Doordan, *Design History: An Anthology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 89–102.
- 15 Author unknown, "Expo 67: Origin and Status & Multilevel City," *The Architectural Review* (August 1967): 87–88.
- 16 "Minutes of Interdepartmental Meeting to Discuss Australian Participation in the Montreal World Fair," February 27, 1964, NAA: 563/3/2/1 Part 1: 1.
- 17 D. O. May, "Montreal World Fair 1967 E.A. No. 97/64," NAA: 563/3/2/1 Part 1: 1.

Figure 3
Model of James Maccormick's design for the Australian Pavilion, Expo '67. Montreal, NAA: AA1982/206, 45. Reproduced with permission of the National Archives of Australia.



the Commonwealth Department of Works, Canberra. Shortly after the then Prime Minister Sir Robert Menzies confirmed Australia's participation in Expo, Maccormick was asked to provide the Cabinet with "a notional design" to demonstrate "what an Expo building could be like."¹⁸ Before joining the Commonwealth Public Service in 1963, Maccormick was an associate of the leading Melbourne architectural practice Grounds, Romberg and (Robin) Boyd, where he worked on a range of major public and commercial projects. In a matter of weeks, Maccormick produced an indicative pavilion design, conceived around four large, wood-ribbed pillars that doubled as light and ventilation wells; fusing form and function in a way typical of his work in providing a rational face to government (Figure 3). The government had planned to brief a private architect to design the actual pavilion, but Maccormick's simple, generic design impressed the Cabinet, and he was appointed Pavilion Architect.¹⁹

The Cabinet minutes describe Maccormick's pavilion as "exciting without being freakish, and one which could take its place in company with the pavilions being provided by other countries."²⁰ Such easy acceptance belies the long hostility towards modernism from the conservative side of Australian politics typified by Prime Minister Sir Robert Menzies, who saw modern art as subversive and alien to Australian society. In 1937, while Attorney General, Menzies had established the Australian Academy of Art to promote nationalistic landscape painting as the true Australian art. As late as 1958, he was active in blocking modernism from official overseas exhibitions of Australian art.²¹ Yet when the Cabinet met on January 25, 1966 to select the Montreal pavilion design, Menzies raised no objections to modern architecture being used to represent Australia, even though he still expected that Australian visual art express national uniqueness and historical continuity.

Menzies personally nominated Robert Campbell, director of the National Gallery of South Australia and a member of his Commonwealth Art Advisory Board (AEO), to select the art works for Expo '67, assuming Campbell would make conservative choices. Working closely with Robin Boyd, Campbell chose works by established Australian modernists as a complement to the character of the pavilion. Some in the art world found the selection too cautious, believing works more on the edge of contemporary art should have been chosen.²² Alternatively, in a note to the AEO that could have been written by Menzies himself, Valston Hancock wrote that he viewed Campbell's selection "with dismay," believing Australians, like everyone else in the world, had "been 'spoofed' by the form of modern art."²³ But cultural positions were in flux in Australia in the mid-1960s, and Campbell's selection of modernist paintings went to Montreal.

Australia, Urban and Urbane

Homi K. Bhaba describes the nation as a narration, with national

18 James Maccormick, letter to Geoffrey Serle, April 2, 1996, Personal Archive of James Maccormick (hereafter AJM), Brisbane.

19 James Maccormick, letter to Geoffrey Serle, AJM.

20 "Cabinet Minute Decision No. 1472 (Hoc) 9, 1965," NAA: A58285: 1838381: 4.

21 See Sarah Scott, "Imaging a Nation: Australia's Representation at the Venice Biennale, 1958," *Journal of Australian Studies* 79: 53–66, 225–229.

22 Mervyn Horton, "Australian Art at Expo 67," *Art and Australia* 4:4 (March 1967): 269.

23 V. B. Hancock, "Note for File," July 4, 1966, NAA: A463, 1965/5070.

identity emerging through the terms and discourses used to express it.²⁴ Built environments and material artifacts play a role in this process. Neil Leach described them as “objectivated cultural capital.”²⁵ In imaging Australia, James Maccormick described the Australian pavilion as “a place of relaxation and extreme comfort, a quiet haven of tranquility away from the hustle and bustle of the Fair.”²⁶ This was to be achieved through “a simple, functional, restrained enclosure... elevated above the ground and thereby isolated from all other distractions, with air-conditioning, generous seating, and thick carpets.”²⁷ (Figure 4) The architecture proved a challenge for Robin Boyd as exhibits designer because its open-plan interior, extensive use of glass, and plentiful light made it difficult to employ dramatic staging or incorporate a great number of exhibits within the pavilion. Boyd nevertheless accepted the idea of the pavilion as a refuge from the noise and activity of Expo and worked with it.²⁸

The linking of contemporary Australian nationhood with a sensibility of modern, urban ease broke with the grounding of Australian identity in an idealized, rural past, but was more in keeping with Expo '67's orientation towards urbanism. The struggle between city and country is, of course, a central tension in modernity. As early as 1848, Marx described the modern as a specific spatio-temporal model in which the urban, driven by market forces, was supplanting the rural across the world.²⁹ In Australia, the connection of authentic culture with the land, rural enterprise, and the pioneer period neglected the substantially urban and suburban character of Australian society. Boyd addressed this anomaly. The inclusion of a model of Canberra, Australia's purpose-built capital, which was then being extensively developed along the lines of Walter Burley Griffin's 1925 designs as an exemplary garden city, suggested the redevelopment of the Australian landscape on modernist principles. Similarly, through a display of twenty photographs of Australian architecture, Boyd sought to show a consistent development from the colonial to the modern period, the contemporary examples all being modernist in conception.³⁰

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- 24 H. Bhaba, “Introduction” in *Nation and Narration*, H. Bhaba, ed. (London: Routledge, 1990), 1–9. We were reminded of this argument by Guy Julier, “Urban Designscapes and the Production of Aesthetic Consent,” *Urban Studies* 42:5/6 (2005): 871.
- 25 *Ibid.*, citing Neil Leach, “Belonging: Towards a Theory of Identification with Space” in *Habitus: A Sense of Place* J. Hiller and E. Rooksby, eds., (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2002): 283.
- 26 James Maccormick, “Australian Pavilion, Expo '67—Design Report,” January 9, 1967, *AJM*: 2.
- 27 James Maccormick, “Australian Pavilion”: 2.
- 28 Robin Boyd, “Report by Exhibit Architect, Mr. Robin Boyd, F.R.A.I.A.,” NAA: A463, 1965/4715: 4.
- 29 See David Cunningham and Jon Goodbun, “Marx, Architecture and Modernity,” *The Journal of Architecture* 11:2 (2006): 174.
- 30 Robin Boyd, “Report by Exhibit Architect.”

Figure 4
Hostesses and Featherston ‘sound chairs’, Australian Pavilion, Expo '67. Montreal, NAA: AA1982/206, 28. Reproduced with permission of the National Archives of Australia.



Robin Boyd

Robin Boyd is a towering figure in post-war Australian society, despite a career cut short by his early death at 52 in 1971. A significant public intellectual and member of one of Australia's foremost artistic families, Boyd's biographer describes him as "the leading Australian propagandist for the International Modern Movement."³¹ Boyd played this role as an academic, an architect, and a writer. In partnership with Roy Grounds and Frederick Romberg, he was noted for his innovative domestic architecture, being involved in the design of 220 buildings.³² These included diverse forms of residential, commercial, and public architecture, both large and small, extending to experimental designs for exhibition. Boyd's work alternated between international modernism and a regional variant employing vernacular materials such as stone and wood. Of particular relevance to his design work for Expo '67 are the typologies of space and materiality of built construction in his commercial projects such as the Capital Motor Inn, Melbourne (1962–4), and the Stegbar Office and Showroom, Springvale (1962–4).

After WWII, Boyd became director of the Small Homes Service, an initiative of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects and *The Age* newspaper, for which he wrote weekly press commentaries on modern architecture, design, and planning. His advocacy of modernism in print is perhaps his greatest contribution to its promotion, and saw him contribute to international debates about contemporary design through his writing in *The Architectural Review* and other publications. The suburban home often was the focus of Boyd's thinking, writing, and criticism, his monograph *Australia's Home* (1952) providing the first substantial interpretation of Australia's architectural history through the exploration of this seemingly humble topic.³³ Boyd wrote a total of nine books during his lifetime advocating modernism and Australian design. Notable was *The Australian Ugliness* (1960), which castigated the Australian public and designers for their lack of design awareness.³⁴ For Geoffrey Serle, however, these criticisms always "sprang from patriotism and ambition for his country," Boyd being ever hopeful that Australian society and design would mature and develop.³⁵ This position can be seen as consistent with the image of Australia projected by his exhibition schema for Australia's pavilion in Montreal.

Boyd was an experienced curator and exhibition designer, a byproduct of his promotion of modern design. The *Modern Home Exhibition*, held at the Royal Melbourne Exhibition Buildings in late 1949, was an early attempt on Boyd's part to encourage an awareness of "good design," and saw more than seventy Australian companies and designers present trade stands devoted to their products.³⁶ Such efforts to promote a modern lifestyle were part of a larger nation-building enterprise in the immediate post-war period. In the late 1940s, many intellectuals were eager that Australia transcend the conservatism and parochialism of its colonial history to become a

31 Geoffrey Serle, *Robin Boyd: A Life* (Carlton, Victoria, Australia: Melbourne University Press, 1995), Preface.

32 Vanessa Bird, Helen Stuckey, Conrad Hamann, Philip Goad, and Neil Clerehan, "Chronological List of Works by Robin Boyd," *Transition* 42 (1992): 193.

33 Robin Boyd, *Australia's Home: Its Origins, Builders and Occupiers* (Melbourne, Victoria, Australia: Melbourne University Press, 1952).

34 See especially *Victorian Modern* (1947), *Australia's Home* (1952) and *Great, Great Australian Dream* (1972).

35 Geoffrey Serle, *Robin Boyd: A Life*, passim.

36 For a full list of Australian-manufactured goods featured in this important exhibition, see Simon Jackson, "From Britain's Farm to America's Junior Partner and beyond: Post-WWII Exhibitions of Design in Melbourne," *Journal of Design Research* 5:1 (2006): passim.

dynamic, outward-looking, modern nation. For Boyd, the modernization of the Australian home was fundamental to creating a modern nation with modern attitudes, although he knew that it was not a vision shared by mainstream Australian society. Describing the genesis of the *Modern Home Exhibition*, he expressed some regret over the exhibition's sub-theme of "Yesterday, Today, To-morrow," explaining:

The idea was to take the 1890s as "Yesterday," and to poke fun at its floral toilet fittings and unlikely-looking black iron equipment. "Today" was to show, impartially, a representative collection of currently available products. "To-morrow" would be applied to outstanding designs in the various fields. ... But the pity of it was there was so little of value from which the jury could select.³⁷

By the 1960s, however, the quality and availability of Australian design had vastly improved, and Boyd commonly specified products by Australian designers such as Frances Burke, Grant and Mary Featherston, Clement Meadmore, Fred Lowen, and Kjell Grant as an extension of his architecture work.

Boyd's Curatorial Program and Exhibition Design

It is a sign of Boyd's public stature that his role at Expo '67 was not restricted to giving visual form to displays, but encompassed the total conceptual schema of the Australian exhibit. He was given a broad scope to commission new design work, notably the Featherston sound chairs with their many technical and manufacturing challenges, using the exhibition to extend the range of Australian design. Boyd's extensive international travel made him alert to the difference between fact and myth where claims about Australian achievement were concerned. The books made available for visitors to read included serious works of sociology and social comment.³⁸ In a letter to Bill Worth, coordinator for the Expo project at the AEO, Boyd insisted that items only be included in the pavilion if they were truly exciting "in themselves."³⁹ Conversely, a life as an advocate of modernist design as a key component and attribute of a modern nation saw Boyd conceive the pavilion—especially those areas where important international guests were hosted—as "a showcase for the best in Australian design and manufacture in arts, crafts, and industry."⁴⁰ Achieving this involved a huge effort on Boyd's part, which he undertook with his typical enthusiasm and dedication. However, although it was important work, he largely was forced to take it on to support his architectural practice, which was experiencing financial difficulty.⁴¹

Boyd felt Maccormick's pavilion design made it difficult for him to mount a dramatic display, especially in preventing the use of artificial lighting to draw attention to specific exhibits.⁴² He thus resolved to develop the idea of the pavilion as a "very restful

37 Robin Boyd, "Modern Home Exhibition Melbourne," *Architecture* 38: 1 (January 1950): 19.

38 "Cabinet Minute Decision No. 1472 (Hoc)": 4.

39 Robin Boyd, "Letter to William Worth," November 30, 1965, NAA: A1209/84, 1967/708.

40 Robin Boyd, "Report by Exhibit Architect, Mr. Robin Boyd, F.R.I.": 1.

41 See Geoffrey Serle, *Robin Boyd: A Life*, passim.

42 "Cabinet Minute Decision No. 1472 (Hoc)": 4.

sort of building.”⁴³ Commenting to a reporter, Boyd highlighted the importance of the Featherston chairs in this respect, in enabling people to sit in one place to receive information instead of having to walk about for it.⁴⁴ Throughout the pavilion, a sensibility of relaxed living, a certain ambience, taste culture, and general design consciousness were intended to serve as a barometer of the achievement of Australia society and the nature of the Australian lifestyle. Boyd was fanatical about the detailing of the pavilion, and spent endless hours sourcing the components of the pavilion from Australian designers, artists, and craftspeople. Everything had to be Australian, right down to the dinner service and cutlery in the pavilion’s private dining room. Australian timbers featured throughout, as did fine Australian wool.

In Australian exhibits at earlier exhibitions and trade fairs, export materials typically were presented in their unprocessed state to indicate the bounty of the country. In Montreal, design application demonstrated the quality and adaptability of Australian products. A good example is the use of Australian wool, which ranged from the luxurious but hard-wearing wool carpet run throughout the pavilion, the sheer wool curtains, and the hostesses’ bright-orange uniforms. A limited number of “superior Australian objects”—crafts, industrial products, packaged goods, coins, banknotes, and stamps—were housed in self-contained plastic display units to demonstrate the scope and quality of Australian manufacturing and product design.⁴⁵ However, it was more the combination of the pavilion’s architecture, interior design, furnishings, and lighting—complemented by the appearance and personalities of the well-drilled hostesses—that created the true sense of Australia. Neither the Featherston sound chairs nor the display units, the latter conceived by Boyd to look more like furniture rather than exhibition stands, interrupted the continuity of the pavilion interior.⁴⁶ No three-dimensional display was greater than table height, and all were rounded in form to allow easy pedestrian circulation. The number of people admitted into the pavilion at any time also was restricted to preserve the quality of the experience.

Boyd’s ambition for Australian design can be seen in his preparedness to work with local furniture designers and small manufacturers in developing prototype furniture, and not simply specifying existing, perhaps even imported, products. Terence Lane notes that Australian designers and manufacturers experienced many difficulties working in a recently industrialized nation, far from international manufacturing centers, and with a small domestic population of buyers. Facing high tooling and manufacturing costs, Lane argues that many Australians attempted to “reproduce the effects” of international furniture designs, but only achieved a certain crudeness caused by less-sophisticated production processes as exemplified by plywood chairs with flatter profiles and “Scandinavian-inspired” furniture made from less suitable

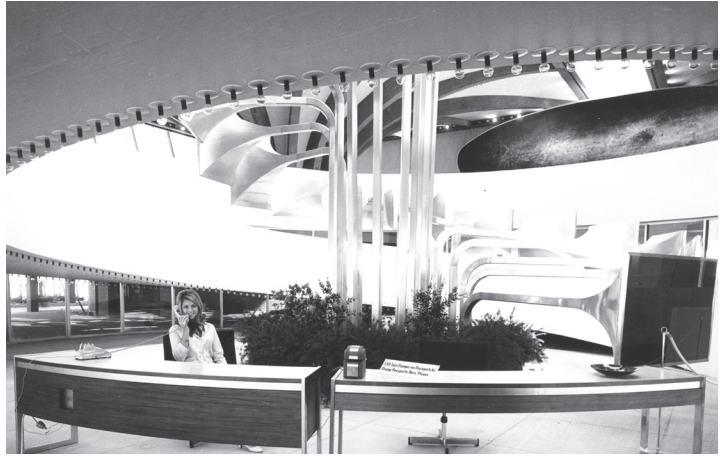
43 “Talking Chairs Tell of Australia . . .,”
The Sun (Melbourne) (April 9, 1966),
NAA: Expo 67—Press clippings,
463/1965/5745.

44 *Ibid.*

45 Robin Boyd, “Report by Exhibit Architect”:
4.

46 *Ibid.*: 2.

Figure 5
Reception area, Australian Pavilion, Expo '67,
Montreal, NAA: AA1982/206, 44. Reproduced
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Australia.



Australian wood.⁴⁷ The Featherston sound chairs, in contrast, aimed for genuine innovation and sophistication. Built from upholstered, molded plywood on an aluminum base, they were fixed to the pavilion floor to enable them to be wired into the pavilion's sound system.

For almost a year, dozens of government technicians and scientists, coordinated by the Department of Civil Aviation, developed the sound equipment for the pavilion and the chair's headrest, some working full-time on the project. In the pavilion, the taped conversations were managed via a large bank of electronic equipment in the pavilion's basement. The idea of the chairs was to enfold the pavilion visitor in comfort and sound, an observer describing the chairs as looking like the "bole of a gum tree with a branch fallen out."⁴⁸ Manufactured by Aristoc Industries, the chairs were never commercially successful, even after the technology in the headrests was simplified. Other furniture in the pavilion, however, represented commercially viable designs available on the Australian market. The Fler Company provided secretarial, visitor, and executive chairs in Tasmanian blackwood for the downstairs and private areas of the pavilion (Figure 5).

A Modernist Mise-en-scene

The openness of the pavilion enabled Boyd to include evocative juxtapositions within the display, all elements serving relational rather than absolute roles. The use of artwork in the arrangement was an important index here, linking Australia's display to the ideal of an authentic, value-driven culture. In recent decades, interest in the role of consumer and design objects in identity-formation in everyday life has grown with their increasing social importance. In the mid-1960s, however, artworks were more reliable in signifying a truly cultured space. Boyd presented the group of Australian paintings according to the hanging techniques of the modern art museum, enunciating what Mary Anne Staniszewski has called "a modernist, seemingly autonomous aestheticism."⁴⁹ Elsewhere in the

47 Terence Lane, *Featherston Chairs* (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 1988): 1.

48 "Talking Chairs Tell of Australia"

49 Mary Anne Staniszewski, *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Design at the Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1998), 61.

Figure 6
Indigenous bark paintings, Australian Pavilion,
Expo '67, Montreal, NAA: AA1982/206, 44.
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Archives of Australia.



pavilion, Boyd commissioned Australian artists to create large panels as original creative works to articulate key aspects of the display. The model of the Parkes radio-telescope, for example, sat beneath a panel by the Australian artist Donald Laycock that depicted the night sky of the southern hemisphere in a painterly, abstract style.

Alternatively, the vibrant designs, simple execution, and raw materiality of aboriginal bark paintings contributed a different sense of cultural authenticity to the exhibit (Figure 6). Initially, the government had not wanted to include indigenous art or performers, a press report hinting they were regarded as out-of-step with “the picture of a modern, growing nation” that Australia wanted to project.⁵⁰ Ultimately, Boyd included them, suggesting how meaning within the pavilion was not invested in single objects, but in distinctions and relations between them in the aim of representing Australia in a more complex and comprehensive way. Art, design, science, and technology all attested in their own way to the growing sophistication of Australian society. If in the mid-1960s the principal uptake of modernist art and design in Australia was by government, corporations, public institutions, and educated professionals, a ten-meter-high display of large, back-lit photographs of everyday Australian activities that spiraled up through the pavilion’s central, circular walkway suggested modernism’s adjacency to everyday lifestyles and practices (Figure 7).

Conclusions

In the mid-twentieth century, Robin Boyd was at the forefront of efforts to further design activity in Australia. His concern for mass taste and desire to promote modernism to the Australian community strongly informed the interior of Australia’s Montreal pavilion. Design was the substance and framework for Australia’s claims to cultural capital, the overall exhibition schema and assembled artifacts effecting a purposeful reconstruction of Australian national identity under the influence of the nation’s changing external circumstances. Such historical change was not novel to Australia. The decade of

50 Author unknown, “Australian ‘Image’
Aborigines Left Out of Display” *The Sun*
(Sydney) (February 17, 1966): GBR 85/1(b)

Figure 7

Central ramp to main exhibition hall, Australian Pavilion, Expo '67. Montreal, NAA: AA1982/206, 45. Reproduced with permission of the National Archives of Australia.



the 1960s was one in which modernization forces spread out over the world; but the priority of a modern aesthetic as a representation of contemporary Australia disturbed the expectation that national pavilions be visibly tied to the identity of their home countries.

There is no evidence that the Australian government had a specific interest in promoting Australian design in itself. The nature of the Montreal pavilion was the corollary of wanting Australia to appear modern, and engaging professional designers to supply an appropriate look. The bold move to privilege a certain quality of experience over specific exhibits had some success for Australia. One Canadian journalist wrote:

I congratulate the Australians.... Their pavilion is a small miracle of good taste and very restful after a day of footslogging. One comes gratefully to the Aussies' great room with its restful lambswool carpet and sits down in one of the deep green chairs. The chair begins to talk, but it is a subdued message, a very soft sell, with just a wistful note of the down-under accent. One... goes out to the patio and... watches the kangaroos at play. All very soothing in an otherwise busy day.⁵¹

In the mid-1960s, however, not all Australia was that comfortable with design modernism. In early 1966, the New South Wales state government brought international opprobrium to the country by forcing the resignation of the Danish architect Jørn Utzon from the Sydney Opera House project.

Robin Boyd submitted a trenchant article against the decision to *Architectural Forum*.⁵² Providentially, the resignation came before Boyd had finalized the exhibits for Expo '67, since he had intended to include an image of the Sydney Opera House under construction by the eminent Australian photographer Max Dupain. Utzon's adventurous design would have provided a strong symbol of Australian progressiveness. Unfortunately, political interference turned the project into a debacle.⁵³ Although many Australians

51 Walter O'Hearn, "Fred, Fiancée and the Fair," *Montreal Star* (May 1967): GBR, Box 85/1(b).

52 Robin Boyd, "Utzon: The End," *Architectural Forum* 124:5 (June 1966): 90.

53 See Bent Flyvbjerg, "Design by Deception: The Politics of Megaproject Approval," *Harvard Design Magazine* (Spring/Summer 2001): 52–56.

expressed their outrage, the project was taken from Utzon, and he left the country. Boyd wrote to Dupain, "With great regret I don't think we can use this (photograph) now. The less said the better about the SOH in Australian propaganda."⁵⁴ Somewhat surprisingly, Boyd and Maccormick encountered no such resistance in conceiving Australia's Expo '67 pavilion, eschewing typical signifiers of national identity bound to Australia's colonial history and economic dependence on staple goods and natural resources for a modernist design vocabulary that represented contemporary Australia as international in outlook and as comfortable with modernity as the relaxed atmosphere of its modernist pavilion interior.

54 Robin Boyd, GRB: Box 87/1 (d).