



Salvador Dalí, *Suburbs of a Paranoic-Critical Town: Afternoon on the Outskirts of European History*, 1936.

COTTESLOE BEACH AT ALKIMOS BEACH

INTRODUCTION

This film interrogates recent developer subdivisions on Perth's suburban fringes. Specifically it will look at this current suburban condition to raise corresponding questions regarding what makes an authentic architectural object. Utilised by many Australian architects and historians to explore ideas about cultural identity, domestic housing has a strong historiographical thread. Rather than tracing this history, our film will look at some points expressed within this thread, specifically those made by Robin Boyd and more recent attempts by architects such as Ian McDougall (ARM) who, following in the footsteps of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown attempt to reveal latent cultural meaning within a suburban condition Boyd would describe as 'Featurist'. We would like to set up this scenario in an attempt to determine how much of Boyd's critique still rings true and to find some position for the architect to operate within this developer centric environment.

IDENTIFYING THE FEATURIST LANDSCAPE

From the outset of *The Australian Ugliness* Robin Boyd pronounces his architectural objectives. For Boyd, an authentic architectural object "should be an honest thing, made with an understanding of all its functions and with a sense of order."¹ What he sees as the hideous antithesis to this modernist dictum, is embodied by the traits of 'Featurism' that he describes as the 'disease' plaguing the Australian built environment. In the opening chapter *The Descent into Chaos*, he clearly identifies the suburbs, and specifically those new ones as the primary hotspot of Featurist activity. Here he sees the harmony of good design destroyed by the commercial motives of the Featurist who "proudly destroys any unified entity...by isolating parts, breaking up simple planes, interrupting straight lines."²

Elements of the Featurist landscape are easily identified at Alkimos, or any new development, where the commercial housing market is immediately evident in the streets lined with competing display homes. Here the street is the shelf in which the architectural object is for sale. A typical Featurist house in Boyd's books is a "contrived variety...of different tastes in decorative external styling,"³ a "promiscuous plagiarism"⁴ of exotic

¹ Robin Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness* (Melbourne: The Text Publishing Company, 2012), 8.

² Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness*, 23.

³ Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness*, 178.

⁴ Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness*, 174.

romanticism and historicist elements. This is nowhere more clearly evident is the names given to each model home, for instance the 'Princeton' display home in suburban Butler from "the shores of Long Island, New York...It's the perfect balance between classical architecture and modern sophistication."⁵ Keep driving and you will surely pass "The Neo-classical" next to "The Contemporary" beside "The Capri" across the street from "The Chateau". Detailed comparison is required to reveal much difference among the street elevations. Perhaps it is only the replacement of a square hollow column for that of a Doric on the 'portico', better yet the combination of the two, or it is merely a façade element clad in composite timber rather than white render that distinguishes the "Driftwood" from the "Espresso".

These names are meant merely to evoke the connotations of a style, and could be used to reflect on the changing position of the suburb in our culture. British derived names, once more popular in the 90's, yet seldom used now, attempt to capture notions of heritage, monarchy and authority.⁶ Whilst what are more common in the examples today are those of traditional American and Mediterranean, alongside references to populous European urban centres – speaking of a move away from traditional notions of the garden suburb as reflected in home names such as "Elmwood". Whilst international references are abundant in these catalogues even more compelling as potential sites of cultural investigation are those examples which reconstruct our own local narratives in newly established suburban contexts. In one instance we see 'The Cable Beach' home in Baldvis, where one can "feel the sense of tropical living."⁷ Looking for even more local references we find 'The Cottesloe' on a freshly levelled site at Alkimos Beach 50km's north of Cottesloe itself.

The marketing strategies employed in new suburbs like Alkimos reveal a transforming suburban ideal. Graeme Davison observes that this ideal is more related to commercial marketing tactics than to the utopian ideals the original suburbs were born from.⁸ Now we see quite the opposite occurrence of the retreat from the vices and dangers of an immoral city life that the suburbs were once sold as. What appears more commonly today is an attempt to attach notions of denser urbanity to many of the new subdivisions – the "Agora" development at Alkimos is such an example. The suburbs were historically once about urban disconnection, whereas now they are being marketed attached to notions of connection or hybrids of the two. This reflects many societal changes long in the making, of which we can only touch on here, including the dissolution of the nuclear family structure and emergence of transient occupants including FI-FO workers.

FROM CRITICISM TO CRITIQUE

Our filmic investigation attempts to examine the imagery and vignettes employed in both their advertising languages (catalogues, billboards and video) and architectural outcomes. We want to explore this housing and the marketing stratagems used as receptacles for transported and dislocated cultural fragments from both here and abroad. Where Boyd saw wanton and immoral stylistic appropriation in the Featurist suburb, Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi saw similar housing subdivisions in America that exhibited similar Featurism as unavoidable as material that contributes to the continual transformations of architectural authenticity – it is

⁵Plunkett Homes, accessed March 14, 2016. <http://www.plunketthomes.com.au/display-homes/princeton>

⁶ Kim Dovey, "Dreams on Display," in *Beasts of Suburbia* ed. Sally Ferber, Chris Healy and Chris McAuliffe, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1994), 142.

⁷ Ventura Homes, accessed March 14, 2016. <http://www.ventura-homes.com.au/home-designs/traditional-homes/the-cable-beach/>

⁸ Graeme Davison, "The Suburban Idea and Its Enemies," *Journal of Urban History* 39, no.5 (2013): 843.

within this kind of framework we wish to operate. Continuing on from *Learning from Las Vegas*, the *Learning from Levittown* studio, run in 1970, attempted to transfer their methodologies from the Las Vegas studio into the domestic suburban landscape. By looking at the quotidian nature of places like Levittown Scott Brown and Venturi sought to identify the signs and symbols that appeared in these housing tracts to understand social and cultural practices of the communities inhabiting this mass housing. From this they aimed to develop an architectural language free from some of the more myopic elements of Modernism - one more relevant to the social issues of the time, using a formal language which reflected a new social complexity.⁹

At Levittown Scott Brown and Venturi were interested in the individual changes a homeowner would make to their homes in both the decorative external styling and interior renovations and furniture choices.¹⁰ New examples in Perth reflect the submersion of these desires into the economic model of the building company – for instance it is common for a building company to give the buyer the option to create “your own individual elevation by using different design features, e.g. Portico, Planter Box, Gables, Blade wall, Gate House, Rendered Sills and many more.”¹¹ The same goes for internal elements, including raked ceilings, feature stone wall partitions, soft closing draws and customisable splashbacks. Our film becomes focussed on this bombardment of choice, the marketing of ‘value’ and the selling of lifestyle ‘choices’.

IDENTIFYING THE SURREAL LANDSCAPE...AN OUTLINE FOR OUR FILMIC APPROACH

Ian McDougall states that by participating “in the way the contemporary world manipulates imagery” we may develop some “aesthetic actions” using literal imagery in repetition, juxtaposition and transplantation.¹² By manipulating this imagery in such a way we might reveal a way to operate in a consumer centric environment that collects together disparate imagery as part of its marketing methodologies. By transplanting the tropical style gazebo into a borall brick and colorbond fenced backyard, the developer establishes this object as universally relevant, whilst simultaneously attempting to give the house an aura of unique authenticity, thus “the imagery is consumed, yet at the same time cheats the consumer.”¹³ It is this double action that McDougall proposes architects should explore within such an environment, how can something be universal and authentic at the same time?

Film becomes the ideal medium in which to attempt an answer to this question. Film can establish, like an encyclopaedia, a framework for the collecting together of objects that are authenticated by their inclusion within such a structure. This framework can then be manipulated through techniques like montage to generate rapid juxtaposition helping to draw out characteristics, taking them and perpetuating their qualities to generate unforeseen formal relationships. The outcome of such montage generates what McDougall describes as a kind of “surrealist dislocation.”¹⁴ These actions of transplantation, like the image of Cottesloe beach embedded within the kitchen splashback of the ‘Cottesloe Beach’ at Alkimos Beach hint at a Dali or Magritte painting. Even Boyd described the Featurist house in such a manner stating that “Everywhere, the closer you look the

⁹ Denise Scott Brown, “Invention and Tradition,” *Mas Context*, accessed March 27, 2016. <http://www.mascontext.com/issues/13-ownership-spring-12/invention-and-tradition/>

¹⁰ Jessica Lautin, “More Than Ticky Tacky,” in *Second Suburb Levittown*, ed. Diane Harris, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 317.

¹¹ Ideal Homes, accessed March 14, 2016. <http://www.idealhomes.com.au/homes/elevation-options/>

¹² Ian McDougall, “Dispersion and the Encyclopedic,” *Backlogue, Journal of the Halftime Club*, 1 (1993): 37.

¹³ Ian McDougall, “Dispersion and the Encyclopedic,” 37.

¹⁴ McDougall “Dispersion,” 37.

more features you see, as in the old novelty picture of a man holding a portrait of himself holding a portrait of himself holding a portrait of himself, until the artist's and the viewer's eyesight fail."¹⁵ Max Ernst described Surrealist collage as 'the systematic exploitation of the fortuitous or engineered encounter of two or more intrinsically incompatible realities on a surface which is manifestly inappropriate for the purpose.'¹⁶ Indeed, the application of a name like "The Santorini" to a picture of a bulk standard developer home on a non-descript site with no contextual representation will, like Magritte's icon (*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*) make us ponder conflicting messages and the nature of representation. So too does Alkimos become the manifestly inappropriate surface on which developers and consumers play out incompatible lifestyle realities. We spent an afternoon on the outskirts of Perth's suburban fringe literally doing as Boyd warns us against - "picking up disconnected ideas wherever"¹⁷ we find them.

¹⁵ Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness*, 46.

¹⁶ Max Ernst, "M50," in *100 Artist Manifestos from the Futurists to the Stuckists* ed. Alex Danchev, (London: Penguin Books, 2011), 242.

¹⁷ Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness*, 189.