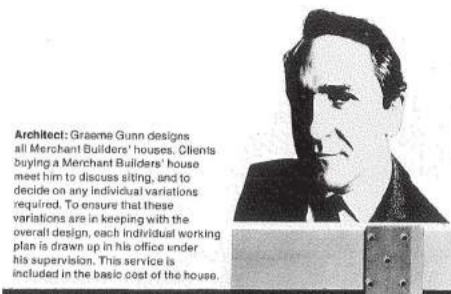




Advertising for Merchant Builders: 'Quite a knob, Mr Yencken'

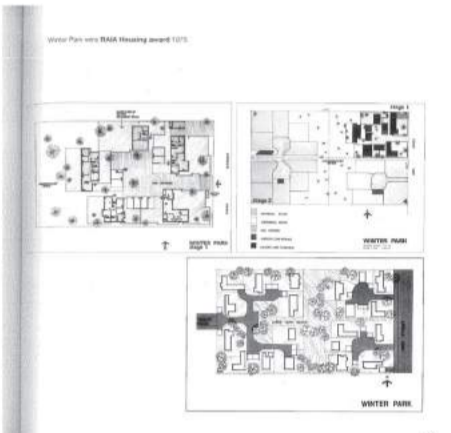


Architect: Graeme Gunn designs all Merchant Builders' houses. Clients buying a Merchant Builders' house meet him to discuss siting, and to decide on any individual variations required. To ensure that these variations are in keeping with the overall design, each individual working plan is drawn up in his office under his supervision. This service is included in the basic cost of the house.

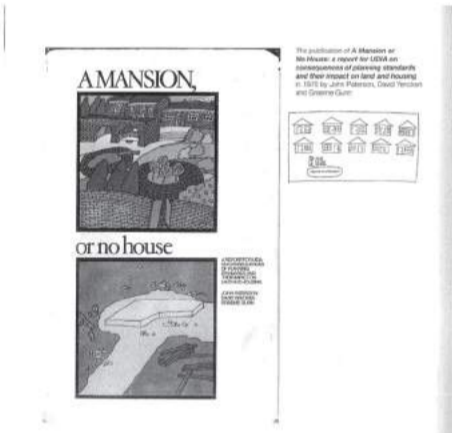
Architect Graeme Gunn featured in the Merchant Builders catalogue and says: "Graeme Gunn designs all Merchant Builders' houses. Clients buying a Merchant Builders house meet him to discuss siting, and to decide on any individual variations required"



Winter Park cluster housing, designed by Graeme Gunn, view of the shared driveway. Driveway is paved and contributes to landscaping the whole site. Note that there are no fences to be seen.



Winter Park cluster housing, designed by Graeme Gunn for a whole suburban block. The houses are distributed in 4 groups of 5 individual houses. There are no fences to be seen, one driveway per cluster services access for all residents, and a generous and avried landscape is accessible to all residents.



Front Cover of seminal text, A MANSION, or no house

Dearest Architecture School:

In 1965, David Yencken and John Ridge founded Merchant Builders, on the premise that;

"...house, interiors, landscape and site should be harmoniously integrated by top design professionals." (Goad 2015, p.10, cited in Merchant Builders; towards a new archive)



Comics published in A MANSION or no house make sarcastic commentary on suburban norms. One person says: "But I like looking into my neighbours bathroom." Lack of privacy, a symptom of conventional lot subdivision, compared to the cluster model shown.



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Kit house by Merchant Builders: The Studio House catalogue entry with interior views, and details about the design



Merchant Builders service for 'Specially Design Houses', customisations were offered with every purchase of a kit house, in consultation with Graeme Gunn

The successes of their designs and merits of their holistic approach have been proved at a number of scales from individual house, in their various kit housing ranges, to whole suburban lot, of which Winter Park (1970-74) is exemplary of the full scale and scope of their motivations. However, examples of their cluster housing are few, and the current state of kit housing is represented by the likes of Metricon and Volume Builders. But are these concerns just historical, or do they have contemporary architectural relevance?

One contemporary condition, particularly pertinent to small private practice, is the generic yet complex alteration and addition brief: new kitchen & dining, bathroom/s and often a combination of living and/or bedroom and on a modest budget. Most often a part of the existing house is demolished, to be replaced by a new addition to the back, with glazed doors opening directly onto the remainder of the yard. Discussions about site and landscape, so strongly advocated by Graeme Gunn through Merchant Builders are rarely discussed amongst residential alterations and additions.

"The Merchant Builder's house was not based on what suburbia was, and in this sense, the concept was radical... [it] was the logical successor to Walter Burley Griffin's vision for a sensitive Australian house and its integration with the landscape." (Goad 2015, p.10, cited in Merchant Builders; towards a new archive)

Seminal to Merchant Builders was the publication of A Mansion or No House in 1976; A report of UDIA on consequences of planning standards and their impact on land and housing, written by John Paterson, David Yencken (founders of Merchant Builders) along with Graeme Gunn. The text assesses the intent of planning standards against the reality of their outcomes; that these regulations often engender generic and formulaic design with little regard for landscape. The text also identifies the inherent limitations of conventional lot subdivisions on the way that site is used.

A small private practice in Fitzroy has found an opportunity in this all too familiar brief, to bring to contemporary relevance some of the concerns the Merchant Builders had; namely site and landscape. Claire Scorpo Architects, since 2013 have designed and built alterations and additions that provoke ideas about landscape, how it can be conceptualised beyond a three-part sequential relationship between front yard, house & backyard, and

suggest ways that even small sites can be more intensively and actively utilised. This resonates with the holistic approach of Merchant Builders, some 50 years ago. The following projects by Claire Scorpo Architects show evidence of Gunn's large scale ideas about site and landscape, seen at Winter Park, translated to the scale of single private lots.

Case Study #1

St Kilda East, Residential Renovation
Project Team: Claire Scorpo, Nicholas Barker, Matthew Stanley

This new addition sits quietly behind the existing brick house, tapering away from the existing to accommodate a new kitchen, while a new deck floods the rest of the site, merging timber floors inside and decking outside. Inside the new volume, a narrow horizontal opening allows a view out to an intimate outdoor space, between the old and new parts of the house. While cooking dinner, there is a privileged view to the rear of the site, a view specific to this new opening. The informal living space, although small, generously offers access to diffused light through semitransparent materials. This very small 'micro' addition to an existing house makes much more intensive use of the site. The new volume strikes multiple visual connections with the landscaped area, while the existing house maintains direct access. The new deck has two particular characteristics; a small forecourt at the entry to the house, and a less formal decked area to the rear, lends itself to outdoor dining, by including a window to the kitchen. While sitting outside on hot summer evening, both the old and new house are visible. This tiny new addition enables complexity in the relationship between the 2 'parts' of the house, existing and new, and also enables the whole site to be utilised effectively and actively. Similar design strategies are evident in Albert Park, a later project also by Claire Scorpo Architects.

In 1965 Graeme Gunn wrote a short recommendation to home buyers, published with the details of the Courtyard House:

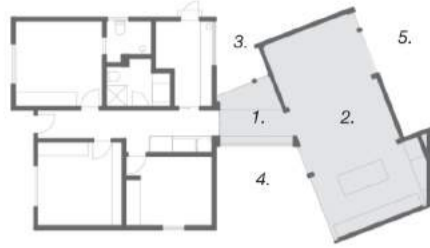
"The total environment should be given as much consideration as the choice of a particular house, and should greatly influence that choice... Selection of land-its size, price and locality in relation to your requirements, family needs in daily routines, landscape for most effective development of the site, and furnishing, they all need worrying about. We'd like to worry with you." (Ridge, J & Yencken, D 1965, cited in Merchant Builders; Towards a New Archive)

All images on this page with credit to: Merchant Builders; Towards a New Archive, exhibition catalogue, 2-12 November 2015, Dulux Gallery Melbourne School of Design, Melbourne, Vic

B U I L D E R S



Plan of St Kilda East, new addition show in grey
1. forecourt deck
2. rear informal deck



Plan of Thornbury, new addition show in grey
1. Library link
2. kitchen, living, dining
3. Courtyard with view from library
4. Courtyard as informal dining
5. Courtyard as informal space to rear



View from the new decked area, with a view to both the existing house, and the new addition on the left. Exposed structure will become inhabited by vegetation as the landscape adapts to the addition.



Library link, looking out: Seat to enjoy reading, with a direct view into the courtyard, existing weatherboards visible



New kitchen, dining and living space, exposed structure: structural frame fabricated off site, and assembled on site in response to a very tight time frame specifically for this project.



View from inside; looking out to the forecourt deck, and into the new kitchen/informal living space



Study model at 1:50 of the new addition; structure, and bookshelves are shown.



Rear of the site, looking through the window into the kitchen, and exposed structure.



View from the dining area towards the library; plywood shelves for the client's big collection of books.

Case Study #2

Thornbury, Residential Renovation

Project Team:

Claire Scorpo, Monica Shanley, Katherine Sampson

Winner of the 2015 Architeam award for Residential-Alterations

Upon entering the timber Californian bungalow in Thornbury, a view along the length of the site leads to the new kitchen, dining and living spaces. Before entering the new space, a small link displays a generous collection of books, and provides an informal bench to read on, while admiring one of the three new courtyard, sandwiched between the existing weatherboards and the new extension. Past the library is a generous new volume accommodating kitchen, living & dining. The kitchen has direct access to a second courtyard, similarly between the existing and new parts of the house. This courtyard becomes an additional outdoor dining room, actively programmed by the adjacent kitchen. The third courtyard is tucked away, to the rear of site. This space has an informal quality, spilling out from the living/lounge area.

Another excerpt from a Merchant Builders catalogue positions the practice in relation to siting:

"The siting of each Merchant Builders house is planned by the architect to make the most of the individual block of land. In planning a house for a given site, the architect considers the terrain, any views available, existing trees on the block, the volume of passing traffic, and the proximity of adjoining buildings." (Ridge, J & Yencken, D 1965, cited in Merchant Builders; Towards a New Archive)

This attitude to siting resonates strongly with the formation of three courtyards on a single site. This idea is also strongly present in the realisation of much larger scale projects by Merchant Builders, most notable perhaps Winter Park (Doncaster 1970-74) where the landscape permits independently occupied houses, access to a generous landscape while maintaining privacy without the use of fences. The significance of this approach becomes vividly apparent when comparing the conventional relationship between back of house, and backyard, with the highly differentiated relationships created between three courtyards, and built forms of the house.

The regular nature of lot subdivisions i.e. rectangular proportion with the short ends to the street and rear, are almost prescriptive

of siting, in order to comply with regulations. Rescode is the regulatory guideline that control levels of privacy and access to natural light. A maximum amount of overshadowing of neighbouring private open space is controlled, and similarly overlooking. The regulation doesn't account for any large trees, or other vegetation (i.e. landscape) that may already overshadow or prevent overlooking. Nor would it normally accept landscape as a means by which to meet these requirements. This often results in a 'landscape' of screens limiting views, and blind walls on boundary. The relationship between individual houses is invariably by palling fence. The orientation of the house on the site is a symptom of lot size & proportion, garage at the front, house, and yard at the back.

"Fifty years on, the Merchant Builders manifesto... are even more acutely relevant to the Australian Context." (Pert, A 2015, cited in Merchant Builders; Towards a New Archive)

Since Merchant Builders disassembled, planning policy has not changed radically, despite recommendations made by Yencken, Ridge & Gunn, in A Mansion or no House private single lots are still the module of land subdivision and the character of the suburbs, is an amalgamation of personal preferences for style, not space.

My position on this content is a negotiation between a common experience as an architecture student, a unique insight to the practice Claire Scorpo Architects, where I have worked as a student for approximately three years, and an independent curiosity for kit housing globally. There is perhaps an opportunity in contemporary residential architecture to engage with large and small scale ideas; about landscape & site, component & customisation, specific to the Australian Landscape that were uniquely pioneered by Merchant Builders over half a century ago.

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S C O R P O