

The Young House Architect Esmond Dorney 1959 At Risk or Adaptable?

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CHANGE AND CONTINUITY

– Conservation and adaptation in 20thC Regional Modernism

“Life, in all its phases, is, or should be, progressive. Take the modern jet propelled ‘plane, with all its beauty of line and speed, and compare it with the clumsy, inefficient bi-planes of thirty years ago. What a contrast, and what progress has been made in those thirty years, yet it is only a result of our lengthy learning step by step, how to improve those clumsy-looking old aeroplanes.”

Esmond Dorney, quoted from a talk he gave to design students in 1948¹

‘The Young House, designed in 1959, is Esmond Dorney’s best-known residential work. Its significance lies in the way it describes in formal and spatial terms the role played by the architect and his work in Tasmanian Architecture... Sited prominently above the suburb of Sandy Bay the Young House appears as an alien, or implant, relating more to the Melbourne work of the period than any Tasmanian precedents. However this formal language hides and then on closer inspection reveals Dorney’s understanding of the complex nature of Hobart’s topography, climate and prospect...’².

The recent adaptations of the Young House designed by Dorney show how, by re-engaging with the original designer’s philosophy, a new generation can accommodate considerable changes yet still remain faithful to the spirit as well as the expressionistic form and functional detail of Modernism, in its particular Tasmanian regional expression.

‘We were always interested in the work of Dorney and had often driven past the house and said how much we loved it,’ said Rose Gaby, “When it came up for sale we bought it. The house was owned by a single woman and was never really intended to be a family home because it only had two bedrooms. We lived in it for about a year before commissioning architect Robert Morris-Nunn to design an extension for a parents’ retreat; our vision was for a kind of caboose at the back of the house...which wouldn’t interfere with the integrity of the original’³

Alex van der Hek and Rose Gaby are the owners of this innovative and emblematic Dorney home built in 1959. In 1999 the house was adapted, after earlier changes made by previous owners, with the conscious intent of interpreting conserving authentically the original. An extension and adaptation of the interior by Robert Morris-Nunn Architects re-engaged with Dorney’s design, with a contemporary design solution informed by a well-researched understanding of the original concept and construction detail.

‘It is a prominent and historically important piece not just because it is Dorney’s most acclaimed work, but more significantly because of the understanding of the landscape of Hobart and the relationship to site which is expressed in its structural and spatial organisation...The intention of the new work is to build in the spirit and upon the principles of the existing house, in order to cater for a growing family in 1999’⁴

¹ Notes belonging to John and Isobel Thorpe, Lindisfarne

² Reinmuth, G (compiled by) The Young House then and now, RMIT

³ Hillier, Rose-Marie, Retro Revival, House and Garden

⁴ Morris-Nunn and Associates Architects, 536 Churchill Avenue Extension, Design Report

The house has been decorated and furnished with the same attention to authenticity. Finds from secondhand shops and garage sales have been restored, and laminates found to match the original. A sculptor friend of the family, Ian Munday, made a piece for the niche in the fireplace. Commissioned furnishing fabrics by textile designer Penny Malone are integrated into the original 50s treatment. But now the children have grown up and the family needs a more independent wing for the new generation.

“The benchtops are Laminex with a fifties pattern and we even found a place that sells the aluminium strip edging which was characteristic of the era, so we were able to copy that detail... We found vinyl covered dining chairs in a second hand shop. But the fifties-style elliptical coffee table was recently made by local craftsman Peter Costello.”⁵

In 1948 Dorney gave a class to design students telling them what he thought important in designing a house. By reviewing the owners' adaptations against the principles he proposes, we can see how true the house remains to Dorney's own intentions and therefore its particular cultural significance. Aptly enough Dorney begins by espousing change in architecture, making an analogy with developments in aviation design.

“Similarly, Architecture should advance with the times, and we must learn not to stick to our old ideas on building just because we are used to them, but must keep on trying to think of something new – not for the sake of being different, but for the sake of improving on the old, until we evolve something better.”

Flexibility to change is in the nature of Dorney's design, which employs modular planning and lightweight non-structural panels, within a wide-span steel frame, in contrast with traditional masonry and weatherboard houses. However he did bemoan change, in his comments to Petrina Moore about earlier changes made to the Young House, when she interviewed him in 1990:

“In the planning, the furniture, they altered some things, spoilt the whole concept really...they changed the inside into more the old formal way; it's a pity. That's sort of been the plague of my life, people wanting to alter things”⁶

I suggest in this paper that quite extensive change can conserve original architectural and cultural value, but that this depends on research and respect for the intentions of the original, as well as particular attention to detail and a loving creativity.

The authenticity of the adaptations at the Young House comes from the close research and understanding of the original, by both the owners and their architects, Morris-Nunn and Associates. But it also took some creative leaps founded in a deep appreciation for the original.

“In building a house today the first things to be considered are sunlight and view, whether it be of the garden or somewhat more extensive. The planning should begin with these points. The living room should have view and afternoon sunshine, when it is more likely to be in use... The bedrooms should get morning sun but to avoid waking too early, particularly as far south as we are in Hobart it is well to arrange the windows so that the sun does not come in too early. This can be done in many ways, such as by a projecting corner of another room.”⁷

The 1990s bedroom wing extends the structural bay, in proportionally related dimensions. The extended wing, like the original, integrates storage space into the pattern of the external wall panels. Internally, the owners designed and built new joinery elements, extrapolating Dorney's use of storage units to subdivide the larger spaces defined by the roof form.

⁵ Hillier, Rose-Marie, Retro Revival, House and Garden Magazine

⁶ Esmond Dorney in an interview with Petrina Moore, 1990

⁷ ibid

“As much built in furniture as possible should be included in a new home – storage walls are very convenient particularly between such rooms as the kitchen and dining rooms, where they are available from both sides and save so much walking and carrying. With properly built in furniture the work saved in cleaning a home is very considerable, no furniture to sweep under no heavy wardrobes to shift, no awkward corners and everything built to suit. It is more than worth considering if building a new home to build in as much furniture as possible.”⁸

‘The new extension to the rear of the site takes its cues from the existing building. It is conceptually conceived as a pavilion in the garden with design intentions based on the built vocabulary (frame, platform, roof) of the existing house. Of key concern is the articulation of the new work from original existing work. A duality of identity is set up where both pieces can be seen as separate while at the same time being read as a whole unified work. The physical point of this articulation is a semi-transparent link, clad in twin wall polycarbonate sheet. This link serves to physically/visually connect the pavilion with the existing house and then through the ephemeral nature of its construction/materials articulate the two as different. Where this link attaches to the existing house is the only point of alteration to the existing building fabric.

The tectonics of the new extension follow those of the existing house: The structure (as with the existing house) is formed by a series of butterfly pipe frames following the curves of the existing. The floor plate extends beyond the bedroom providing a threshold outside the internal boundaries- a podium in the garden. The roof floats and slides along the frame and over the walls separated by a series of transparent strips of polycarbonate. The northern side of the roof is feathered and reduced to become just unclad structure. The walls clad in mini-orb sit between the pipe frame under the blue ceiling. These walls wrap around the south, west and east of the new extension, orientating the interior to the northern light and view. Slit windows, horizontal in the study and vertical in the bathroom, capture focused aspects of the garden and site.’⁹

Dorney’s ideas for his students about the benefits of openness, between the kitchen/utility and dining/living areas, were innovative at the time in Tasmania.

“The brightness and warmth should be there in the kitchen for the housewife to enjoy, as she spends so much of her day in this part of the house...it should be placed on the side where it catches the morning sun...the kitchen should be like a unit within a unit. It should be like a car with all the controls at hand. In a car you could not have the brake on one side of the car, the clutch on the other and the steering wheel somewhere else and still drive efficiently. It is just the same in the kitchen... not hindering the housewife’s work...not that a modern kitchen should be work, it should be more of a pleasure... with the modern washing machines, a laundry is not necessary as it can be installed in the kitchen and the whole washing is done and damp-dried while the housewife is going about her other work, or just relaxing.

Houses today are often too much shut off into small units like a closed box for each activity. Of course it is necessary in some cases but not at all necessary in others. For instance the combination kitchen-living room is wonderfully convenient, and so very workable. The kitchen is a unit in itself, but opens into the living room, divided only by a bench for serving; and if the living room has a glass wall, making the garden part of the whole scheme, what a bright, happy workplace it is.”¹⁰

However the original owner, Mrs Young, was not so ready for this utopian vision and wanted a separate kitchen and laundry. Happily enough one of the changes that the owners wanted in 1999 was greater openness. Morris-Nunn’s reworking of the spaces in 1999 quite changed the

⁸ ibid

⁹ Morris-Nunn and Associates Architects, 536 Churchill Avenue Extension, Design Report

¹⁰ ibid

primary living spaces, opening up the generous entry hall and removing dividers to the dining area to give a single living space almost double the original in floor area, and open to the kitchen. The kitchen itself absorbed the small laundry space.

“The lounge is where the whole family comes together, and it should be a room of ease and relaxation, with a large welcoming fireplace as a focal point and a glass wall again bringing warmth, sunshine and beauty into the room. No picture, however wonderfully painted, could equal this natural picture. The piazza can be brought right into the lounge for some distance, giving even a closer link with the outside. A separate lounge and dining room, though necessary in some cases is not so necessary in a small home; a dining alcove off the lounge, large enough for the particular requirements of the householder, lends extra spaciousness and makes it so much more livable. Instead of leaving the fire and the warm room to go to a cold one to eat, you remain in the warmth and cheerfulness of the lounge room”¹¹

In the 1999 changes, the owners opened the dining room to the living room creating a dining alcove, and in fact removed a structural partition that defined the entrance hall, almost doubling the area of the living space. Sacrilegious as this would be in many a Victorian terrace house, this has had precisely the effect Dorney espoused, opening the living space to the entrance terrace with its sunshine and vegetation.

‘By demolishing the existing wall between the kitchen and the laundry, the kitchen can be pushed back to give more room to the dining area and extending the space available to the kitchen. The new joinery of both the kitchen and the storage will have the same 1950s feel as that found in the existing kitchen. It is proposed that the grooved paneling to the wall adjacent to the front door (believed to follow Dorney’s original intent) be removed and replaced by plasterboard. The carpet which currently covers the living room floor will be removed to expose the timber floorboards matching the kitchen floor. It’s important to note that these interior changes will not affect the exterior fabric of the building. Their purpose is to increase the ‘workability’ of the interior spaces and their resolution is based on the principles found in the existing house and in Dorney’s own writings; the open planning of the living kitchen areas and the inclusion of built in furniture wherever possible.’¹²

It is now 10 years since the adaptations and extension were built to accommodate the growing family. Now those growing children are teenagers and the family thought again last year that a very different shape of living was needed; they put the house on the market. After some woeful propositions from would-be owners with little interest in the architecture of Dorney and the 50s period, they thought again.

With some ingenuity the owners and the architects for the 1990s adaptations have devised a new configuration. The adaptations proposed in 2009 provide a wing for the teenage generation at the back of the house, rearrange bedrooms, create an en-suite bathroom and provide more study space within the original core of the house. A lap pool will be added in the garden.

Living with a 50s bathroom for 10 years was perhaps devotion enough; and perhaps Dorney himself would have embraced the advances in plumbing technology over the intervening half century.

“The bathroom with its modern fittings can be very attractive. It needs to be on a bright side of the house and to be in warm colours as with hard, cold composition floors and tiled walls it can be a very cold cheerless place instead of the bright warm place it should be.”¹³

¹¹ Esmond Dorney in an interview with Petrina Moore, 1990

¹² Morris-Nunn and Associates Architects, 536 Churchill Avenue Extension, Design Report

¹³ *ibid*

"Never forget that a garden is an integral part of the house. Even the most perfect house in the world is beautified, softened and becomes more a part of the landscape if trees and lawns surround it. The garden should not be allowed to remain outside but should be made an integral part of the whole house otherwise its beauty is wasted. You may think I over emphasise the combining of the inside and the outside of the home with glass walls, but I know of no home that I have designed thus, that the owners would change back to the old conventional style."¹⁴

Would Dorney turn in his grave to see the family stepping out through the lightweight screen walls onto the entrance terrace to plunge into their pool on a sunny morning? I suspect that this would fit his vision of a progressive evolution of living both indoors and outdoors.

Conclusion

We cannot know what Dorney himself would have made of the new interpretation of his design for the Young House. Would he see the changes as progressive? In my estimation the owners and their architects have achieved a new lively expression with radical and courageous changes that manage to conserve and enhance the architectural intent of the original. It remains distinctively a Dorney house.

At the same time the changes have allowed a very different shape of family life to unfold; this I feel is quite consistent with Dorney's deeper goals for a residential architecture that could adapt to life's change. I think as conservationists we can embrace the new work, not merely accepting change because "there was no prudent and feasible alternative" but rather celebrating change, because change has brought new life, inspired by and cherishing the original inspiration.

In Dorney's own words:

"A house should be planned like a machine, but a home is much more than a machine, and can in many ways express its owner's personality."¹⁵

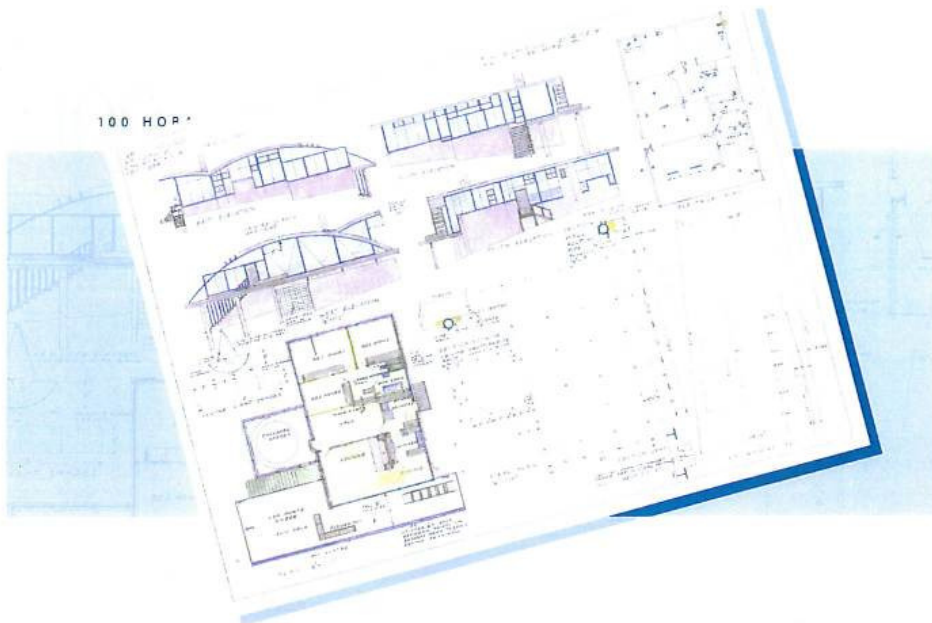
¹⁴ Esmond Dorney in an interview with Petrina Moore, 1990

¹⁵ *ibid*

The Young House J Esmond Dorney 1959



" Esmond Dorney's domestic work expresses (apparently wilfully) the complex diversity of its setting ... running along slopes that cant and fold with the changing contour... designing with the character and form of this place, Hobart ". Leigh Woolley, Tasmanian Architect



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