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Asymptote & Drome
Lacoste + Stevenson
Neil & Idle
William Lim
Michael Viney
Brasilia
William Smart
Daniel Libeskind

Reflections on the Virtual

Redefining traditional notions of 'unbuilt' work,
extending the parameters of navigable space,
venturing into the virtual world of
architecture in cyberspace...



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Tasmanian Modern

A slight departure in the **Then & Now** series sees for the first time the coverage of a suite of work, as opposed to the usual focus on a single building. The projects in question are three houses completed over a ten-year period, between 1974-1984, by Tasmanian architect Michael Viney.

■ This decade was a significant one in Tasmanian architecture, seeing the formation of local practice Heffernan Nation Rees Viney (HNRV) and a major shift in local architecture culture that occurred as a result. Although HNRV's influence was most felt in Hobart, national coverage of the practice – including a 1980 cover story in *Architecture Australia* – led to interest in this work from interstate academics and practitioners. This brief intersection of four very good practitioners (HNRV had dissolved by 1982) was to have a continued effect on architecture in the state, providing the only strong alternative in the last 25 years to the regionalist agenda proposed by Barry McNeill and his followers. This is significant, as it must be remembered that Tasmania's complex and vibrant arts scene was in a most formative

stage in the early 1970s (the members of HNRV tell that it was impossible to buy a cappuccino until about 1975!) yet the practice was implementing a rationalist agenda while architects in the Sydney metropolis were obsessed with clinker bricks, tiled roofs, and clear-finished timber.

■ Michael Viney is perhaps the most complex of the four original partners, and subsequently provides the most interesting subject for a 'Then and Now' review – although it has to be said that a similar article charting Robert Nation's trajectory since his departure from the state would be equally compelling. Although Viney found practice in the small, fiercely parochial culture very frustrating, he stayed in Tasmania until recently, persisting in his 'mission' despite a lack of patronage, very lean budgets

and little support at an intellectual level. Unfortunately, Viney's reluctance to teach – he has rarely even lectured publicly – and his impenetrable, highly stylised writings, have limited his influence to that promulgated by his former colleagues and assistants.

■ The three houses reviewed in these pages represent key points in a gradual shift in Viney's work over the decade in question, from a more direct referencing of overseas sources (Viney House), to a fusion of these ideas with local conditions and his complete 'manifesto' (Cattell House). The Commonwealth Bank House demonstrated a widening of his formal references (the Italian Rationalists in this case) and a major increase in the role given to colour in his work. Of the three, Cattell House is perhaps the most arresting, despite its extremely

raw finish and neglected state. (It should also be noted that Cattell House has never been documented to any great extent, appearing only briefly in a 1982 edition of *Construction Review*.)

■ Viney's relocation to Melbourne in 2000 saw Tasmania lose one of its most significant practitioners, ever. The houses featured here are merely the tip of an iceberg – a separate 'Then and Now' would be required to examine his later work at the University of Tasmania where a series of very large buildings have transformed an entire Hobart suburb. To interstate and overseas architects, Viney's work remains largely unknown, other than through the tales of their colleagues who were fortunate to work with him over the past 30 years, before going on to start their own practice (myself included) or to hold key positions in larger national firms.



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Michael Johns ■ Michael Johns is the current owner of the Commonwealth Bank House, and has refurbished and 'completed' the house over the past few years in collaboration with Michael Viney.

■ The house is sited longitudinally, stretching from east to west, resulting in all living areas facing north. As all adjoining development follows the natural contours the house stands out from the hill but remains quite private from adjacent properties.

■ There are seven terraces ascending from the bottom of the house at the street and garage to the top of the site where the street address and entry terraces are located. Most of the external terraces are paved in solid red bricks for outdoor entertaining. The brick paving encourages the use of potted plants, so we have located 52

01 - 05. Viney's 'manifesto', The Cattell house, circa 1976/77, is regarded by former colleague Bob Naton to be "his finest work of the 70s".

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large pots of tulips that provide a strong burst of colour in spring. The terraces in front of the house are planted with roses, while behind the house the garden consists of daffodils. This combination of plants supplements the all-white 'Greek' aesthetic of the main walls.

■ The living environment is low stress, with plenty of scope to escape within what is a deceptively complex medium-sized house. The spatial flow on level two (kitchen, family room, living and front entry) is well thought through to allow a variety of living spaces. From these spaces, huge windows from floor to ceiling open onto northern balconies to what are truly awesome views, day or night

■ The house is extremely easy to live in for two people (but up to six if required). My wife and I generally occupy only the eastern third over both levels, heating only this area of the house in winter. Internal entertaining is easily done with the totally open plan and flow stretching some 30 metres from the kitchen in the east to the impressive fireplace on the west wall.

■ The house is probably the most 'commercially' specified of any recent housing construction in Sandy Bay and certainly 'looks the part' as a result. It is a very easily maintained design and the solid (double skin) brick and pier construction is well suited to the rock and clay base. External garden walls have required some modification with additional flex joints and separation from housing footings to allow for seasonal movement.

In conclusion, this house is absolutely great to live in and is presented beautifully in aesthetic terms. I am sure it is a project of which Mike can be justifiably proud. In the words of my wife Elaine, "I love my house!"

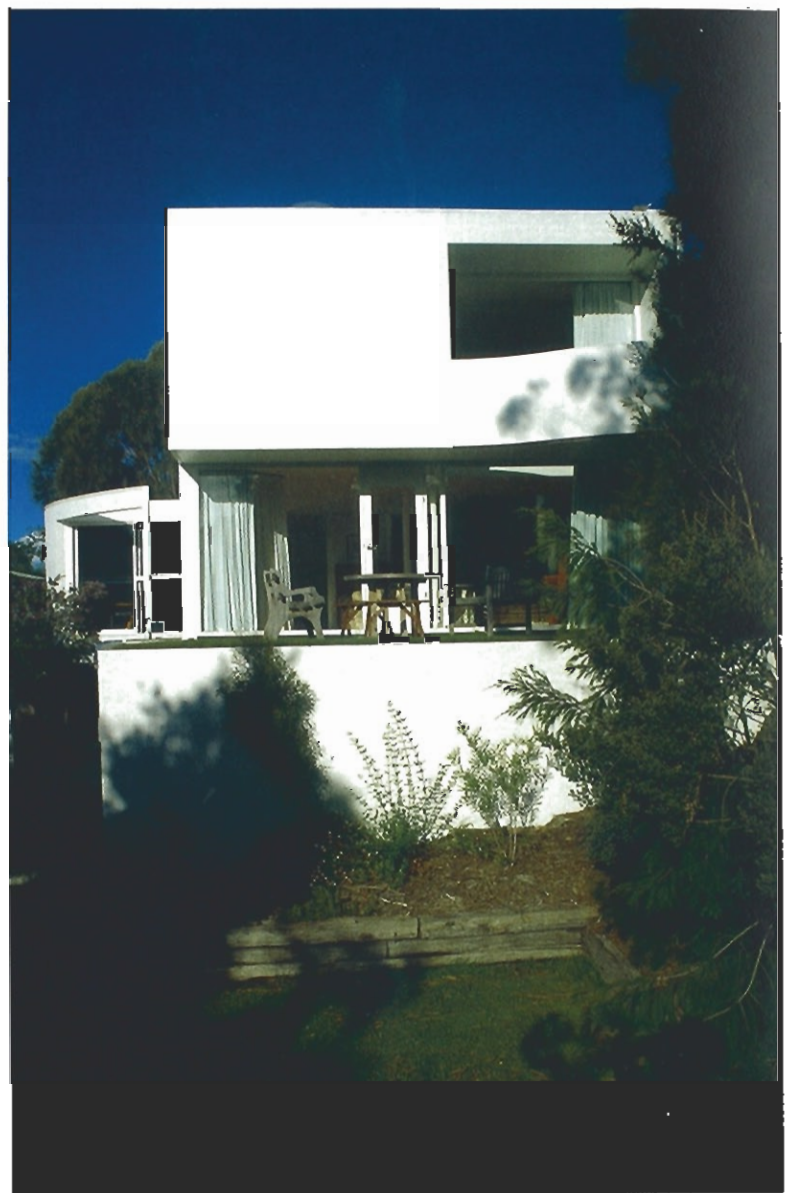
Bob Natlon Partner Nation Fender Katsilidis ■ Mick Viney was indirectly responsible for my initial awareness of architecture, but that's a 1956 story. Through the years of 1974–1980 I had the benefit of being in partnership with Mick in Hobart and have recently re-established contact with him through his relocation to Melbourne.

■ During 40 years of architecture I have encountered only a handful of architects that bring to their craft the depth of consideration and personal intellectual view that Mick pursues. The formal distillation and deeply private development of his ideas and Tasmanian location has resulted in little of his work being published or known beyond the local architectural culture. In particular, it is a pity that the Cattell House was not appropriately recorded and applauded as I believe it was his finest work of the 1970s. This article is an appropriate and long past due celebration of the quintessence of this important work that grew the 1970s.

■ The three houses illustrate the development in his uncompromising style whether or not it has recognisable references. Mick's initial concepts were often richer to my eye, but his refining process pursued his search for personal absolutes.

■ There was often office debate about the indoor/outdoor continuum and the effect that framed/frameless glazing allowed/disallowed in this relationship. The three houses illustrate Mick's view and his commitment to it.

■ Mick has now embarked on a new phase of his architectural life, to Melbourne's benefit, and the architectural culture will come to realise the substance of his talent in its midst.



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Barrie Shelton Urban design consultant and author ■ I would go so far as to say that in Tasmanian history there have really only been a couple of points at which local buildings here have really been significant on a national scene. It wasn't until the late 1970s, when Heffernan Nation Rees Viney emerged, that any Tasmanian work impacted at a national level. A key role of the practice within Hobart also became the way in which they made local designers think in different ways. This is hard to dispute. ■ It seems to me that the dominant pair were Nation and Viney, although Viney was the one who really absorbed what you might call 'intellectual' sources, and synthesised those. Nation had of course, but in a far more hurried, off-the-peg way. A classic example of this in Bob's work is his

own house where, even though it is a highly referential work, there has been some sort of transformation – what one might call an appropriate transformation – from sources to site. Bob (and Mike) are very, very clever manipulators of physical space. My suspicions are that Bob influenced Mike, but not in the way that some overseas people impacted on Bob's work. Bob's influence was I think in the form of an object influence, like the Douglas House for example – it was more to do with a more general aesthetic approach. I think that Mike was aware of a range of philosophers and so forth of whom he knew, so I don't think it was a superficial thing – I think it was a happy coincidence. ■ One can talk about region and context, as seen in Barry's (McNeill's) use of regional timbers and so on, but

the fact is, even though Viney's sources may have been from elsewhere, his melding of a building to a particular site is, I think, very, very good. For example, in the case of the Claremont Golf Club, there are few buildings that sit as appropriately on their site. However, I think the (Commonwealth) Bank House has a less easy relationship. From my view however, I don't see that tension as a weakness. Of course, being too displaced from a place is problematic, but equally, being too entrenched in a place, too myopic and blinkered, has been a problem for Tasmanian architects. Ultimately, I think good things come out of a marriage of both local and international sources, and I think Viney's work achieved something in that way.



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Jennifer Taylor Professor of Architecture at QUT (The notes below are edited extracts from Jennifer Taylor's text on post-war architecture, *Australian Architecture since 1960*, coupled with extracts from her cover story on Heffernan Nation Rees Viney in *Architecture Australia*, November 1980. We thank Jennifer Taylor for her kind permission to use this material.)

■ From a distance it may be tempting to criticise the work of Heffernan Nation Rees Viney on the basis of its dependency on overseas models and its seeming lack of direct relevance to Australian conditions, but close up one's perspective changes. The particular precise but sculptural aesthetic of these buildings, with large expanses of glass and absence of external, sun-protective devices, would be climatically unsuitable throughout most of Australia. In cooler Tasmania, they are just acceptable.

■ The Viney House is the most accomplished. This flat roofed, timber building with vertical boarding is set on a timbered site in a hillside suburb that overlooks Hobart. The house is painted white throughout. It is a sculptural cubic building with large expanses of fixed glass and formally positioned flush windows that punch dark holes into the tight, white planes of the walls. Internally the house consists of a two-level utility and sleeping zone that opens into the generous living area and is extended by voids above through the full height of the building. Internal planning is open and space multi-layered, with visual connections maintaining the continuity of the building through the various levels. Due to the feeling of containment produced by the box-like enclosure of the total interior volume, extensive glazed sections extend the space within to the formal external spaces beyond. Ties with the white

architecture of the 1930s are no longer evident.

■ These white buildings were a transitory isolated phase in Australia's architectural history. At their best they were elegant works that modulated forms in a smooth and controlled manner. Much of their delight came from the subtle variations in the quality of light as it passed through clear glass, or translucent, glass-block sections of walls, or was reflected off angled white walls. The buildings have a high level of sophistication and refinement, and demonstrate an uncommon sensitivity to the aesthetic qualities of architectural design – all attributes that can be nothing but welcome.



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Michael Viney Architect ■ In 1964,

Japan Architect produced a special edition titled *Nature, Space and Japanese Architectural Style*. Other articles followed, elaborating on the idea of removing the boundaries between the inside and the outside, developing techniques for visually linking interiors and exteriors with various objectives, such as the desire to achieve a sense of 'floating'.

■ These essays provided me with completely new information and a few years later their powerful influence emerged. With the autonomy that private practice allowed me, and as an owner-builder, came the opportunity for synthesis. Also, by this time, a greater awareness of the landscape had occurred with the promotion of the bush garden. Nigel Pennick had written *Geomancy* and, much earlier, Le Corbusier described the promenade in his *Villa at Garches*. All these thoughts came together as an 'insight', which I

have summarised below.

■ Architectural spaces are structured and interconnected with the resulting configuration related to the landscape and/or the environment by a selected linear relationship, or by a place perception.

■ The architecture to landscape transition is visual and locates the architecture to the site. This linear relationship structures a journey and that journey compounds the sum of parts which remain in the user's memory and enriches the experience.

■ Architecture is created from the inside out – from space to form. They are integral to, and inform each other to resolution.

■ The aim is to create buildings with special qualities that are contextually appropriate and resolved. Buildings with these qualities have, I believe, an inherent or inner logic. It is this inner logic that generates interest and arrests the attention.