

## **Day in The Age: A Critical Observation of Architecture**

### **Abstract**

Architect Norman Day has been integral to shaping Melbourne's built work since the early 1970s through built work, exhibitions, writing, and teaching. The representation of architecture through the written word of Norman Day revisits the role of the 'Architectural Critic' through a contemporary lens to assess the implication it made on the Australian built environment. Having worked in Robin Boyd's office, Day was also the architectural commentator for *The Age*—Melbourne's daily newspaper—from 1976-2011, where he contributed over 500 articles. During this time, he was Australia's pre-eminent architectural critic also working with ABCTV and the Sydney Morning Herald. He was awarded the Bates Smart Award for Architecture in the Media in 2004.

This research was conducted as archival work of the written word in a variety of publications, mainly newspaper but also in books and magazine articles. The analysis of these articles results in a grouped based content analysis referencing projects, themes, and chronology. Days main projects during this time are positioned alongside his public criticism. Several interviews were also undertaken with Norman Day.

Not dissimilar to Robin Boyd, it will be argued that Day's architectural journalism as simultaneously making the activity of the architect accessible to the public, while communicating to architects globally the philosophies and methodologies at that moment in time. However, Day's critiques, mode of criticisms and engagement with media were quite different from Boyd's.

Keywords: Norman Day, Architectural Criticism, Media, Melbourne Architecture.

### **Introduction**

Architect Norman Day has been integral to shaping Melbourne's architecture since the early 1970s through built work, exhibitions, writing, and teaching. The representation of architecture through the written word of Norman Day revisits his role as an architectural critic. However, at this stage of the archival project, this is not an effort to produce a hagiography or explore theoretical machinations of architectural criticism in Australia. Having worked in Robin Boyd's office, Day was also the architectural commentator for the *The Age*—Melbourne's daily newspaper—from 1976-2011, where he contributed over 500 articles. During this time, he was Australia's pre-eminent architectural critic also working with ABCTV and the Sydney Morning Herald. He was

awarded the Bates Smart Award for Architecture in the Media in 2004.

This research is situated at the beginning of Day's contribution as architecture critic for *The Age* newspaper until the end of 1979 to align with the radical architectural exhibition that was held at the Powell Street Gallery in Melbourne. Titled, 'Four Melbourne Architects', the public experienced architecture in a way that was a first in Melbourne. This exhibition ran for two weeks in September 1979, marking a pivotal shift in the profession. The goal of this research was to look at the body of written work from that period and to explore the development of the archival process suited to architectural journalism.

The method employed here was to create an index of Day's writings, collecting all articles referencing Norman Day, during the period 1976 to 1979. This work then involved analysing the information contained in the articles by categorizing the topics of discussion. Obvious information included in articles, such as the subject of criticism, credited architect, and location of the subject is extracted from the reading. As not all articles include the same data to extract, educated online research filled in the blanks. Working toward a broader and more cohesive index of Day's written work, the source of publication, in what section it is located were also included in the index. For additional quantitative data to retrospectively review the subjects of Day's criticism, we strived to include the date of the subject's completion, the geographic location of the subject architect, the typology of the subject, as well as an image of the subject. The collection of these related topics for each subject developed out of search inquiries that came up to and during the article collection process.

This paper seeks to organise this archival material in order to ascertain what further questions might emerge from Norman Day's archive. This work is in its preliminary stages, and it would be hasty at this stage to over conceptualise or overlay a singular concept to this archive. Of course, this would be all too easy to do. For example, easy narratives could be found in his relationship to Robin Boyd and their different public roles as critics. Such a genealogical approach may overlook the fact that Day worked through different media and was a part of a different network of cultural producers to Boyd. The historiographical approach produced here contrasts with prevalent approaches that might develop a hagiography of Day's work through his writings and architectural projects.<sup>1</sup> Rather, the initial aim of this project is to position Day within the social and cultural milieu of Australian

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<sup>1</sup> Space does not allow for this argument to be fully articulated here. However, see for example a Naomi Stead's compilation of Australian architectural criticism which appears to emphasize architectural hagiography over more fragmented social, cultural and personal histories in many of its contributions. Naomi, ed. *Semi-detached: Writing, representation and criticism in architecture*. Uro Media, 2012. See also Alexandra Lange's work with its overt emphasis on the architectural object. Lange, Alexandra. *Writing about architecture: mastering the language of buildings and cities*. Chronicle Books, 2012.

architecture between the late 1970s to the mid-1980s. A central question from this continuing archival project is to ask what new formations, and schisms, of architectural production, emerged in Melbourne architecture after Boyd's death in 1971? At this stage, preliminary claims about Day's archive would only obscure this question.

This process has led towards the development of a more cohesive metadata index. The final index comprised 120 listings with ten metadata fields. Consequently, the subjects of Day's articles can be grouped over approximately forty-one different years associated with project completion, although some are indexed as a range of dates due to the unclear nature of their construction. What is important to note is that nearly half of the projects discussed were completed during the 1977-79 period that this research looks at, and 72% were completed within five years of Norman Day's first article at *The Age*. These figures demonstrate that the architectural critique brought attention largely to recent developments. It is clear that Day had a desire to focus on the current, in order to allow for his commentary to be seen as relevant. What it also did is immediately draw attention to what was being designed at a critical moment in Melbourne and Australian architecture.

## **Historical Background**

### ***The Age and Architecture***

Day's engagement as architectural critic of the *Age* built on the paper's ongoing engagement with the architectural profession. This engagement can be traced to the pivotal shift in the late 1940s with Robin Boyd's initiative for the Small Homes Service. Boyd was Director of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects Small Homes Service from 1947–1953, and for many years after 1948, he was the editor of this service for *The Age*. In addition, he authored weekly articles which demonstrated an approach to the exploration of Australian architecture, philosophies also reflected in his published written works. Boyd's writing and the introduction of accessible design through the Small Homes Service shifted the way *The Age* dealt with its representation of residential architecture. *The Age* was now directly engaged with the architectural community, and features within the home living and real estate sections of the paper encouraged a more direct description of local and national designers, including collaborating with the local Victorian Chapter of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects for articles such as the 'RAIA Home of the Week'.

### ***Norman Day***

Given the background described above, it may seem not surprising that Day—who had worked in Boyd's office prior and after Boyd's death in 1971—came to the role of the *Age*'s architecture critic, which Day disavows. However, his name had been mentioned in *The Age* in his own right prior to joining the journalism team. This included commentary on the iconic Fishbowl project, Day

being Boyd's project architect, in a December 1972 article discussing the permanence of plastics.<sup>2</sup> After Boyd's death, a home Day designed in Hawthorn was included in a December 1974 article described it in detail by the announcement of its auction.<sup>3</sup> Other times, Day provided his own commentary through Letters to the Editor as seen in January and April of 1975 regarding the rebuilding of Darwin and informing readers about the lack of protection attributed to the Sydney Opera House, respectively.<sup>4</sup> In April of 1977 just prior to the column kicking off he had a home showcased as the RAI A House of the Week.<sup>5</sup>

Norman Day graduated from the University of Melbourne with a Bachelor of Architecture in 1971 and was registered as an architect in Victoria in 1972. The following year he became an Affiliate of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects. While pursuing his Architecture degree, Day worked at Romberg and Boyd Pty Ltd under Robin Boyd until Boyd's death in 1971. He continued working with the company as a Director with Frederick Romberg and Berenice Harris until 1972.<sup>6</sup> He then established his own practice as a partner at Day Davey Pty Ltd Architects. Since 1974, Norman Day Pty Ltd, now known as Norman Day + Associates has been practising in Melbourne and in Vietnam since 2001.

Day's first endeavours in architectural criticism and media indicate the fault lines and formative alliances evident in Melbourne architecture at the end of the Whitlam years. In the early days of his own practice, Day joined the RAI A Editorial committee, for the publication formerly known as *Architect Magazine*. In 1974, editor Paddy Young stepped down as he had recently been elected to the role of President of RAI A Victorian Chapter. Day states that he was the only one to volunteer for the position and became editor of the magazine at age 28, doing so for approximately a year. Notably, at this time monthly editorials and articles critical of the profession were published much to the organisations chagrin, and he was let go from the position after allegedly publishing an edition with Queen Elizabeth the Second on the cover as satiric commentary for an organisation named the 'Royal' Victorian Institute of Architects.<sup>7</sup> While editor, Day published his own book, 'Modern Houses, Melbourne' and in 1977 edited an edition of the National RAI A magazine, *Architecture Australia*. "Modern Houses, Melbourne" is notable for presenting the work of a younger generation of architects trained in the late 1960s and 70s. These architects were largely interested in exploring and revising the orthodox modernism of those architects who had been trained prior to the mid-1960s, with an emphasis on the human condition. Upon removal of his post

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<sup>2</sup> "Economics of Survival." *The Age*. December 14, 1972. p.6.

<sup>3</sup> "Hawthorn Winner." *The Age*. December 21, 1974. p.39.

<sup>4</sup> "Letters to the Editor." *The Age*. April 23, 1975. p.8.

<sup>5</sup> "RAIA Citation Award No 22." *The Age*. April 4, 1977. p.29.

<https://www.newspapers.com/image/123262794/?terms=%22norman%2Bday%22>

<sup>6</sup> Peter Raisbeck and Christine Phillips, Robin Boyd: Late Works (Melbourne: Uro Publications, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Norman Day, Interviewed by Dillon Webster, Melbourne, June 24, 2020.

at the local chapter, he was also removed as editor from the national platform.

After completing his pro-bono role of Editor with the RAIA, Day met with Sally White, the Arts Editor at *The Age*. At the time, the paper had a fierce reputation for journalism and during their conversation, she proposed he write an article to discuss architecture in Melbourne as nothing more than a test.<sup>8</sup> It was published the following day, referencing Norman Day as 'Architectural Correspondent'. This was the catalyst of his role as architecture critic at *The Age*.

### **Architectural Criticism 1977-1979**

Arguably, the time between Boyd's death in 1971 and 'Four Melbourne Architects' exhibition in 1979 indicate a shift in Melbourne's architectural discourse as ideas related to both Brutalism, Late modernism and Postmodernist architecture were debated. During the years of Day's work for *The Age* between 1977 to 1979, most of the articles were published weekly on a Tuesday. At other times, the writing was published in a Saturday, or Arts-specific edition, which supposedly would have a larger or more targeted audience. Subjects examined in these include The Parliament House Design Competition, likely due to the relative importance for the nation. Day also featured Max May and his 'recycled house', as well as Ermin Smrekar who made an impact in Geelong with several unique buildings that went up in the 1970s.

Notably, Day additionally stepped outside of his column and published a book review in the Age Books section on "The Language of Post-Modern Architecture" by Charles Jencks.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, *The Sydney Morning Herald* published a number of articles on Wednesdays, but the majority of these were published in the Saturday edition of that newspaper. The short run of this column in the paper can be interpreted as notable and desired to be shared to the largest audience by the editorial staff.

### **1977**

In 1977, Norman Day contributed nine articles as architectural critic to *The Age* Arts and Entertainment section under Sally White as an editor. In these first few articles, Day discusses 13 projects which are all local to Melbourne, the furthest away from being Edmond & Corrigan's work in Keysborough. He covers a range of building types, but all are relatable to public experience. By including two sports stadiums and a museum, he references familiar venues for cultural entertainment and includes a variety of education typologies and a church which provide a relatable sense of familiarity. As the author of 'Modern Houses Melbourne', Day continued to explore his interest in the residential including several homes in his first year of journalism at *The Age*. By

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<sup>8</sup> Day, Interview.

<sup>9</sup> "Style which has run its course." *The Age*. May 5, 1979. p.27.

choosing to portray everyday environments in local surroundings, perhaps echoing Boyd, Day engaged the public in an approachable way, one which many relate to their daily life and may start to consider their own experiences of.

Early columns received multiple letters to the editor, demonstrating a certain amount of attention the criticism initially drew. Senior Lecturer David Watson from the University of Melbourne, a renowned pedant, wrote with disdain about an incorrect reference to a hexagon rather than an octagon – a mistake that while minor, clearly opened the critic up to receive criticism themselves. However, the Victoria Chapter RAlA president Richard Young commended *The Age* for the inclusion of architectural criticism and hoped to see the column continue as a tool to inform the public of architectural developments.

## **1978**

As Day found his journalistic stride with the inclusion of his criticism alongside others in the Arts and Entertainment section, his column starts to appear weekly. During 1978, 50 articles were published with sixty-seven projects discussed after establishing a reputation with the public the prior year, to read about the built environment, Day appears more comfortable to explore a variety of typologies, including an architectural comparison of recently constructed public toilets in two different parts of Melbourne.

He starts to use the column for what could be referred to as ‘announcements’, which do not address a built subject specifically, but rather a person or event that is deemed worthy of informing the public of. One aspect of these was in selectively discussing new and noteworthy faculty at RMIT, such as Graeme Gunn as the new Dean, and Rodney Wulff and Stephen Calhoun joining the Landscape Architecture department. Another example of the ‘announcement’ is in an article dedicated to Day’s disdain of the Home Show held at the Exhibition Centre.<sup>10</sup> More in an activist role, other written pieces which reflect a political opinion regarding redevelopment decisions for Collins Street (He was a founding member of the Collins Street Defence Movement).<sup>11</sup> These articles directed attention to the inner workings of the architecture and construction industry in Melbourne and addresses the city as a whole rather than the individual pieces of which it is constructed.

## **1979**

The following year of architectural criticism involved widening the breadth of media that Day was

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<sup>10</sup> “Australian dream a clash of symbolism.” *The Age*. August 22, 1978. p.2.

<sup>11</sup> “Streetscape: a word to save our city.” *The Age*. April 4, 1978. p.2.

contributing to. From May through August, he contributed a similarly framed article on architectural criticism for *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Although only six were published, it required him to travel on a bi-weekly basis to gain the journalistic knowledge of place that is required to generate a critique for. In addition, he began to make appearances on local television and radio shows.

*The Age* published approximately thirty-two articles by Day with thirty-three subjects examined, nearly half as many as the previous year. This decrease in the number of articles can likely be attributed to the other work, Day was involved with both in and out of journalism. During the year he was Guest Lecturer at Deakin's school of architecture, the Arts Department at Swinburne Technical College, the Visual Arts Department at Monash University, and at Moorabbin TAFE.<sup>12</sup>

However, the decrease in the number of subjects reflects several changes to Day's approach of his published work. One observation to note is that the articles increasingly focus on a singular topic. Rather than comparing and contrasting multiple, he dives deeper into the social and historical issues that relate to the chosen topic. This is emphasised by examining the subjects he discusses during this period; several are in relation to planning policy, redevelopment of historic buildings, and allocations of city funding.

### *Typologies*

Through the sheer quantity of mentions, alongside the publication of 'Modern Houses Melbourne', Day appears to maintain an affinity for the residential as his most commonly written about building type. While townhouses and multifamily flats are both discussed, the house as a typology was the most frequently written about building (nine times). These often drew attention to newly built homes in styles that may have been unique and unusual to the general population, and the articles did not try and hide this fact, but rather accentuated the differences as positives. Architects that Day deemed as deserving of attention also made their way into the list of homes mentioned, such as with a home designed by the architect Kevin Makin.

Aside from houses, Day's articles across these three years perhaps reflect prevailing private and public investment. However, the next most frequently discussed typology was not always brought up in admiration, Municipal Offices as a specific building type was discussed seven times. Day often brought attention to the architecture of public buildings, associating them with foreign objects provided a coy retort on what Government money was being used to construct.

Interestingly enough, the next most frequently explored typologies are Day Care Centres and Restaurants, with reference to six subjects each. In Day's professional career as an architect, he is

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<sup>12</sup> Day, Norman. "The Written Word and Norman Day." Melbourne. 1992.

grouped together with the Four Melbourne Architects, two of those being Greg Burgess, and Edmond & Corrigan, both of whom had designed day care centres around the early stages of his journalistic career. His personal affiliations merged with his desire to see architecture being pushed into a new realm, and it appears that designing for children afforded the flexibility for this to occur. Meanwhile, a restaurant designed by Ermin Smrekar, caught Day's attention through strong form, intense colour, and reinvention of ornamentation of his buildings – the restaurant as a specific typology was coincidental, the seemingly revolutionary design of the building was more noteworthy than the function.<sup>13</sup>

### *Architects and Geographies*

As suggested above, Ermin Smrekar had the most projects published in this research, with seven subjects discussed attributed to him, in the articles. Closely followed with six mentions were Edmond & Corrigan, architects that Day knew personally and desired to highlight the importance of their work to Melbourne. Gunn Hayball and Bates Smart McCutcheon were both mentioned four times, and Morris & Pirrotta and Roy Grounds brought up three times each. The architects that Day critiques almost always reside in the cities that they build in. Thus, it is interesting to note the ones he mentions out of their geographical placement. I.M. Pei, based out of New York, but who Day met in Sydney and discussed the design of Pei's Collins Street tower, and thus relevant to the City of Melbourne and a project relevant to the public.

Within Australia, approximately 88% of Day's topics were located in Victoria, and of those, 93% were located within the geographical boundaries of Melbourne. Writing about local construction for the public to consume not only aesthetic opinion but historiographic information on highlights that the buildings mentioned were experienced by Day as a true Melburnian would. As Levison (2010) notes, the liveliest and most influential architecture criticism has been largely, local.<sup>14</sup>

Despite this local focus Day himself was also bringing to a Melbourne audience knowledge of architects from outside the city. While architectural events in other parts of the world were mentioned in articles, they were often used as tools to compare against the main subject of a particular critique. However, in the articles collected for this research, Day does select two internationally located subjects to discuss; the National Theatre in London and Aldo Rossi's installation at the 1979 Venice Biennale. Day also discussed Bruce Goff, who came to Melbourne to lecture from Oklahoma, United States. Interestingly, this pattern appears to echo Boyd's own role as a cipher between International architectural figures and Australian architectural discourse. Whereas Boyd was focused on the evolution of Modernism, Day's interests, as these examples

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<sup>13</sup> "To architects, Smrekar is king of kitsch." *The Age*. December 30, 1978. P. 14.

<sup>14</sup> Levinson, Nancy. "Critical Beats," *Places Journal*, March 2010. <https://doi.org/10.22269/100306>

indicate, reflect an interest in how Modernism was being challenged.

### ***Public Engagement***

Boyd himself said that “satisfying popular comment will come spontaneously and pleasantly when ordinary, normally-educated people understand the essentials of architecture as they understand drama, literature, cooking, knitting, and football”.<sup>15</sup> Whether or not Day picked this up during his time working with Boyd is unclear. However, he indeed has a knack for discussing the built environment in relation to popular culture. Films and television shows are reoccurring tools that Day utilises to make his critiques more approachable, and by using Mickey Mouse or the Clockwork Orange as reference points, people were perhaps able to ground an idea in something familiar. This also happens through time-appropriate political references, with analogies such as “... it’s about as exciting as a page from Malcolm Fraser's joke book.” When popular culture is not used, other buildings with historical value are included, or historical, geographical, and typological contexts are introduced instead.

As an architectural professional, Day is seen as holding the same credentials as the architects being written about. As he continued to write, a following grew which prompted him to lead tours and walks for the public to learn about different aspects of the city from the view of an architect. For example, in 1980 he led a bus tour along the Nepean Highway to try and ‘find beauty in old car yards’ referring to the goal of the trip as finding the antithesis of Boyd’s “Australian Ugliness”.

In his articles, Day made judgement calls and positioned himself to describe the shift from Modernist thinking towards Postmodernist and the new faces of the industry. These were not meant to be academic proof, but rather an argument of perception just like any of the other critique.<sup>16</sup> The act of publishing these opinions in the paper through a lens of criticism ultimately opens up the writer to the judgement of its readers as well. While some of the responses to the editor were in small corrections, such as the difference between a river and creek of the same name, others are extremely critical and defensive towards the subjected criticism.

Occasionally, Day would provide a rebuttal to the letters, and in doing so demonstrate a coyness and unwavering mentality – a favourite response in which Day manages to do what the public is not able to do, but that is to draw attention to why the letter was written in the first place, a sense of damaged ego. As a critic, there are bound to be disagreements, yet the sternest of them come from fellow architects, which demonstrate a desire to remain out of the public eye, likely due to the critical and potentially damaging effect that a widely publicised opinion can have on how they are perceived by those searching for architects.

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<sup>15</sup> Stead, Naomi. “(Not So) *Anti-Architecture*.” *Places Journal* (2017).

<sup>16</sup> Day, Interview.

Occasionally, the general public wrote in with opinions from a local community perspective that added to the subject of the critique. These demonstrated that an understanding of the built environment from the general population was not lacking, but rather just never had the opportunity or platform to say anything about architecture. This is clear in responses from July 1979 and August 1979.

In the period of time that he was writing for *The Sydney Morning Herald*, there were more letters to the editors published about his column, than there were columns themselves. The public engagement here could be due to a few things, which we shall speculate on. Some responses were blatant defences from architects of the buildings, which similar to Melbourne, come through with aghast. An unfamiliar approach, however, is that one letter is in response to one of these aforementioned defences and shames them. Responses from the public seem to take Day's side, and many offer the local insight similar to the Melbourne ones. Even a local advertisement for leasing offices the American Express tower ran with an indication of Day's positive review.

The ratio of response-to-columns in a short period of time in Sydney shows a desire for engagement from the public. By providing a critical point of view on something that people interact with daily, readers are able to express their unique experiences, although it is clear that experiencing the built environment takes on commonalities by many.

## **Conclusion**

During the period of time, the research presented is based on, Norman Day Pty Ltd was completing several architectural works as well. The same year as starting to write but prior to beginning, Day had the Malvern Private Hospital Home featured in *The Age*.<sup>17</sup> The first stage of construction of 'Burford House One' for clients Geoff & Noela Burford was completed in 1978. Located in Kildare St, Hawthorn, Victoria, the reimagined Edwardian home demonstrates curiosity and playfulness with volumetric shapes and colour. Assembled unpredictably, the forms of the buildings on the suburban site and the space that is created highlights the user experience. In 1987, several years after the Stage 2 of construction was completed in 1984, it won an RAI A Merit Award, demonstrating that it was recognised in a positive light to the Australian architecture community at large.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, another now well-known work completed in 1980 was the Pizzey House in Kew, Victoria.<sup>19</sup> These works reflect the mentality he wishes to inform the public about, a shift towards the Postmodern in aesthetic and theory. Bold geometric forms and rethinking the traditional experience of environments came across in his design practice.

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<sup>17</sup> "RAIA Citation Award No 22." *The Age*. April 4, 1977. p.29.

<sup>18</sup> <https://web.archive.org/web/20070830182747/http://aardvark.tce.rmit.edu.au/aardvark3/Area-d/NDburf1/home.htm>

<sup>19</sup> Hamann, Conrad. "Day, Norman." *The Encyclopedia of Australian Architecture*. Cambridge University Press, 2012. p. 196.

As the majority of Day's written work occurs in the medium of newsprint, several organisations provide digital copies of printed media. The index prepared to organise the work found includes a link to a digital copy, which allows for easy access with internet service. Just as one might organise archived drawings through a filing system, the index as an organisational tool works to collect and organise metadata related to writing, but the qualitative richness that comes across with Day's voice is lost. This leaves the question of how does architectural writing deserve to be archived? We would argue that writing warrants writing, and that displaying or re-publication of his text could achieve this. Since the digitisation of newspapers has already taken place, utilising clippings in tandem with the extracted information for a reader to simply identify categories and patterns seemed viable. However, existing formatting of columns and errors in scanning can cause difficulties in both laying out and reading the information. Reformatting the text allows for flexibility in layout, and legibility for reading, but removes the nostalgic context of the newspaper medium printed in the 1970s.

Norman Day was a central figure in the emergence of an architectural discourse that sought to revise and question Australian orthodoxies of modernist architecture. His public writings support this conclusion. As a close ally of Edmond & Corrigan, his writings brought to both architects and the public's attention the shift from Modernism to Postmodernism. It is hard to imagine Boyd championing some of the figures or subjects that Day wrote about such as Aldo Rossi, Bruce Goff, and seemingly unknown architects such as Ermin Smrekar, not connected to Melbourne's genealogies of architectural education and tribal classes. Further research would examine how Day's critical practices and work within the profession helped to shape Melbourne's architectural discourse in the 1980s. Particularly, in relation to the Half-Time Club, his teaching at RMIT and the debates centred on *Transition* magazine.

Norman Day's body of archival work indicates that architectural heritage must also be seen to encompass published criticism and public debate. Yet, to fully develop a historiographical understanding of Day's body of work, his written work is integral to that, as it is with the architects he examines in his own research. In any case, Day's critical practices point to the need to affirm the role of the architect as a public critic.