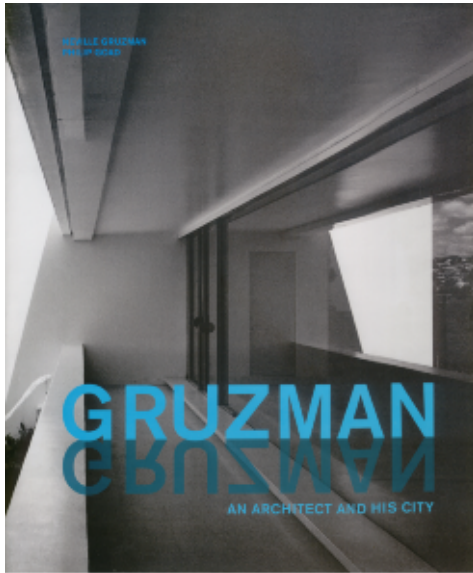


BOOKREVIEW



SYDNEY SPACE MAN GRUZMAN: AN ARCHITECT AND HIS CITY

Neville Gruzman and Philip Goad (ed. by Peter Fisher), Craftsman House / Thames & Hudson, 2006. \$157

I first encountered Neville Gruzman's work in 1989 in an exhibition of 1950's and 60's Sydney domestic architecture. I sensed straight away that I must work for him. There was something esoteric, worldly and deeply serious about his work which struck me at a level I had never experienced before, especially in New Zealand where I had grown up and studied. Although I did not know whether he was still alive, I resolved to work with him. It was to be a life-changing decision.

Neville died two years ago. Now a book has been published on his life's work. Appropriately subtitled "An Architect and his City", it is a fine survey of his achievements as an architect and his contribution to Sydney as an architectural activist, civic advocate, writer, teacher and professor. It has an introductory essay by Philip Goad, a Melbourne academic who gives the man and his work the kind of non-partisan appraisal and contextual fit that

would not be offered in Neville's home city. In an important way, this book is a recovery of the architecture, because his public and professional reputation was that of a stirrer and pariah, a fearless and fearsome critic of architects and architecture, with his own exemplary work becoming less well known over time. Goad wants to bring his work back into focus.

Born in 1925, Neville was part of the first creative wave of modernism which swept Australia in the late 1940's and early 50's. This was a dynamic period, with the creation of new building types and the appropriation of industrial techniques and fittings into architecture as had occurred earlier in the century in Europe. Neville quickly produced work at a very young age which was radically experimental in construction and minimalist in fabrication.

However Neville deeply absorbed other influences and traditions which profoundly shaped his outlook. He was one of the first Australians to embrace Japan post WWII, embarking on a series of suburban houses in the mid-1950's which beautifully applied the spatial extension of Kyoto temple architecture and gardens. Only three years later, an introduction to Frank Lloyd Wright's work led to a brilliant essay in spatial compression for his own house, in which Jørn Utzon thought was contained the finest living room in Australia. Goad does well in his essay to honour these personal transformations because many Australian architects still find Neville's movement away from a minimalist approach hard to fathom.

At heart, Neville was enticed by space. Space was at the core of his craft and is what makes his work so deeply satisfying. To spend time in Neville's home (1958/65/95) is to become attuned to the pleasure of the third dimension and the refined passage of the fourth. To descend the Hills House stair is to be massaged all around by the impossibility of space becoming manifest. Like Adolf Loos, Neville turned architecture inside out, approaching surface as the draping of space and not the definition of enclosure. However

nature was the lining and the forest was his experiential ideal. Architecture was to be felt, not seen. To achieve this, structure was hidden, complex and ingeniously resolved.

Goad particularly impresses with his understanding of landscape as a driving force in Neville's work. At an instrumental level, Neville's architecture was a negotiation of slope with weightless platforms of space, but at an imaginative level, he saw "the possibility of reinstating a landscape, that it was possible to create a topography with architecture, not just an architecture that respected its context." Of all Neville's work, the Hills House (1966/83/92) is his most beautiful realisation, yet this idea of landscape as built form was something Neville also attempted at an urban scale, without much success as most proposals were not built.

The book profiles 24 residential and small-scale public or commercial buildings. Each project contains a short précis by both Goad and Neville, accompanied by beautifully drawn plans and cross-sections. The buildings were photographed by Max Dupain and David Moore, two of Australia's finest photographers. I was disappointed more photos weren't printed in colour, especially David's suite of exquisite photos on the Hills House, whilst some of Dupain's black and white photos seem too dark. Neville closes the book with a memoir of his life and career written just before his death.

I worked with Neville for four years from 1990-93 and developed a close relationship with him. During this time I progressed from a junior position to oversee all design and building projects, including minor additions to the Hills House, major extensions to his home, co-curating a second retrospective exhibition of his life's work, and compiling a book on his writings. I remain deeply appreciative of this experience and his role as my first and most important mentor. It was all that the practice of architecture could and should be.

Richard Reid