Facade of grandeur in suburban castles

Bungee and building those rites of passage

Serving others can be life-changing, writes Sharlene Guest.

FOR a generation born with the iPod, iPhone and iTunes, it is no surprise we’ve bred a culture of iNeed, iWant and iDeserve. The iGeneration, writes Boyd, is a generation born with the expectation of having it all and getting it all when they want it.

IT IS 50 years since Robin Boyd wrote The Australian Ugliness. He was not the first to mention Newcastle in the book, but he could have, quite readily. Boyd was a member of a remarkable Australian family of artists and writers based in Melbourne and Tasmania. My guess is he could get up north much more.

Boyd, an architect, said Australian suburbia was ubiquitous. He wrote that a city in Australia would be no city 'if it did not have its suburbs. It is these that have produced the family habit of passing the year's life between the city and the suburban satellite.'

He goes on to say, "The suburban satellite is a distinctive thing, a community of generations that cannot hope to come to grips with the urban problems. It is, however, a very real feature. We were brought up in the post-war years to appreciate a good feature. Your living room boasted its feature wall. Where once there were ducks, now there was a large striped wallpaper, but only on one wall, the feature wall.

In theory, it was a good feature, don’t we! I remember the first time I drove down Aberdeen Road through Cessnock and noticed the brick facade at the entrance to the high school. That was the only thing about the place that objects that adorn it: two sandstone-carved pots, a carved skull with hair, for dear life high above the doors. I thought they were wonderful. Now, it is just a real feature.

WITNESS: Robin Boyd savages the Australian suburban landscape.

The garden was a good place for a feature as well. A tree stump proudly on a linen doily. Tin foil around an imitation cut-glass cabinet, pre flat screen, the feature wall. Where once there were shrubs, the palm grove, the striped scalloped fence, the animal-shaped brick, the blond brick feature wall. Notice, though, how these features have been enhanced by veneer.

I remember one summer working for a brick veneer firm. Lovely wooden boxes such windows were punched out of walls before smoke, and cheap aluminium sliders lodged in their place, a splash of concrete in the footings and a crew of brickies who’d never been near a technical college in their lives would have the fibro wall covered in cheap sandstocks by nightfall, just as the aluminium claddings were finishing up on the place across the road.

In the 1960s there was a material to cover anything, laminex on the particle board kitchen benches, a laminex kitchen table, random-groove paneling over the patterned velvet wallpaper on the old feature wall, lino over the old floorboards, iron on plastic (in a variety of wood colours) over the laminex on the peeling plywood desktop. We had no use for the word authentic. Veneers gave us a world of choice.

Veneers made each of our houses unique. But this has meant that unlike an English street, say, with its neat row of terraces and cottages, our streetscapes have no coherence.

There is an older brick Federation and a flat roofed deco and a McMahons interlude, but they are curiosities among an extraordinary array of bungalows with identical elevations and conventions designed carefully on the back of beer coasters, with

Around the ankles. Each participant emerges euphoric. Their rate of passage is successful and the experience has been 'life-changing'.

While this ritual may seem barbaric, such rites of passage are a universal phenomenon – significant events within cultural groups that mark a person's transition to the next stage of life.

And while I’m not endorsing jungle-vine bungee jumping, anthropologists have discovered that where a culture fails to provide a defined rate of passage, young people create their own. News broadcasts frequently show the ramifications of teenagers attempting to prove themselves through unhealthy behaviours such as binge drinking, drug use and street racing.

But at a time when youth culture draws so much negative attention, teenagers in our own backyard are developing resilience, character and a sense of purpose through helping others.

I watch another YouTube video filmed in a village of Vanuatu depicting an outrageous ritual undertaken by teenagers leaping into the unknown of a foreign country, forgoing their creature comforts and technology for 10 days of volunteer work and selfless giving. Each participant emerges euphoric. Their rate of passage is successful and the experience has been ‘life-changing’.

While many year 12 students flock to ‘schoolies’ on the Gold Coast, this group of Macquarie College students participated in an initiative called StormCo – ‘Service To Others Really Matters’. Organised and run by youth, StormCo is an adventure in service that has inspired others, with teams from the Hunter Region involved in helping communities across NSW and overseas.

One StormCo leader said ‘The impact these teenagers had on the community in Vanuatu was incredible, but the most amazing impact was the transformation in the students themselves.’

A rite of passage for a postmodern generation? I believe it really can be brought service to others. Service without expectation. Service for the satisfaction of knowing that you made a difference. These young people are proof positive that it’s life-changing!

StormCo is an initiative of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. See unusyouth.com.

Sharlene Guest is the director of communications and marketing for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in NSW. This article is submitted by the Churches Media Association.