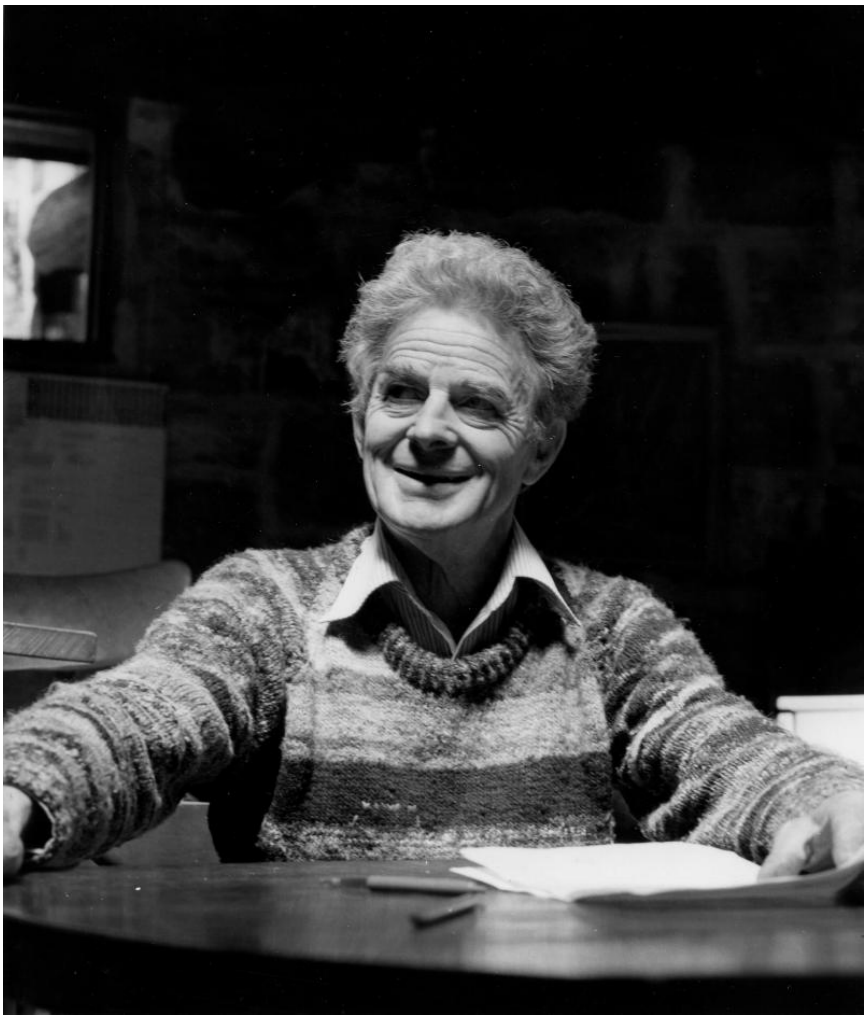
Alistair Knox (1912–1986) and the Birth of Environmental Building in Australia

Rachel Goldlust

Summary

The significance of environmental building in postwar Australia and the emergence of sympathetic housing have been long overlooked as an early environmental movement. Proponents of this type of building have held views contrary to widespread views of material development and heavy consumption. Alistair Knox was an early proponent of environmental building at a time when housing and communities were predicated on development at all costs and tearing down native landscapes to expand the suburbs rather than live in harmony with them.

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Alistair Knox in his later years (1980s)

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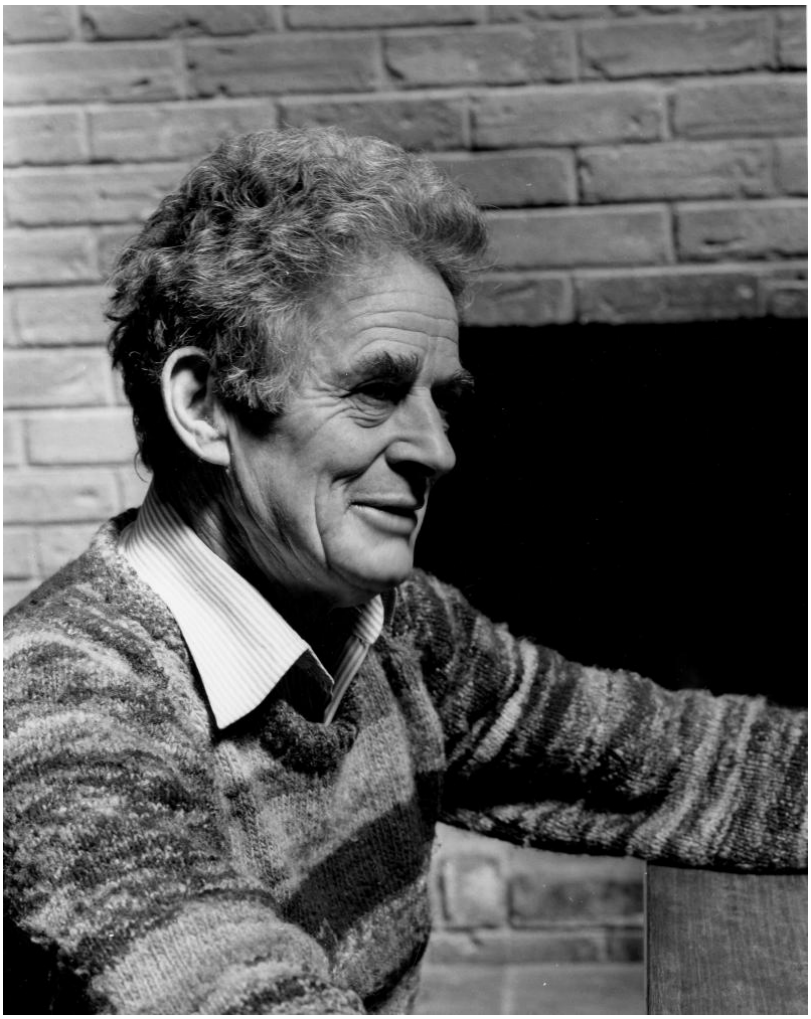
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Environmental building is a term used to describe the building of structures using local materials and with an eye towards integrating natural systems, landscapes, weather patterns, and color tones. A popular construction material in such projects is mud, which has been used in a variety of building techniques, such as cob, pisé de terre, and adobe, since humans first began creating shelters 10,000 years ago. The most well-known return to this material, the "mud-brick revival," emerged in the mid-twentieth century alongside postmodernist ideas that aimed to interweave traditional building philosophies with modern styles and environmental concerns. Alistair Knox was at the forefront of this revival in Australia, and his ideas starkly contrasted with prevailing inner-urban ideas about lifestyle choices, consumption and attitudes towards nature.

Like many colonial settlements, Victoria, the southernmost state of mainland Australia, has a long history of building cottages, homesteads, schools and workshops using natural materials as the most efficient way of creating settlement. During the boom era of the 1890s these techniques fell out of fashion because they were widely perceived as being too primitive and used only as a temporary measure. Colonial society in this era sought

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detachment from rather than engagement with the local features of the environment to better serve its progressive vision. In the early 1900s artists, writers, and assorted bohemians began to migrate out of the city and find inspiration in the native bush of the surrounding hills. These "alternative thinkers" were attracted to Eltham, then a townlet 25 km from the city, to live a quieter life that was more attuned to the native landscape that had previously confounded and challenged Australian settlement. It is thus hardly surprising that Eltham became the site of the rebirth of the environmental building movement at the end of the Second World War.



Alistair Knox in his later years (1980s)

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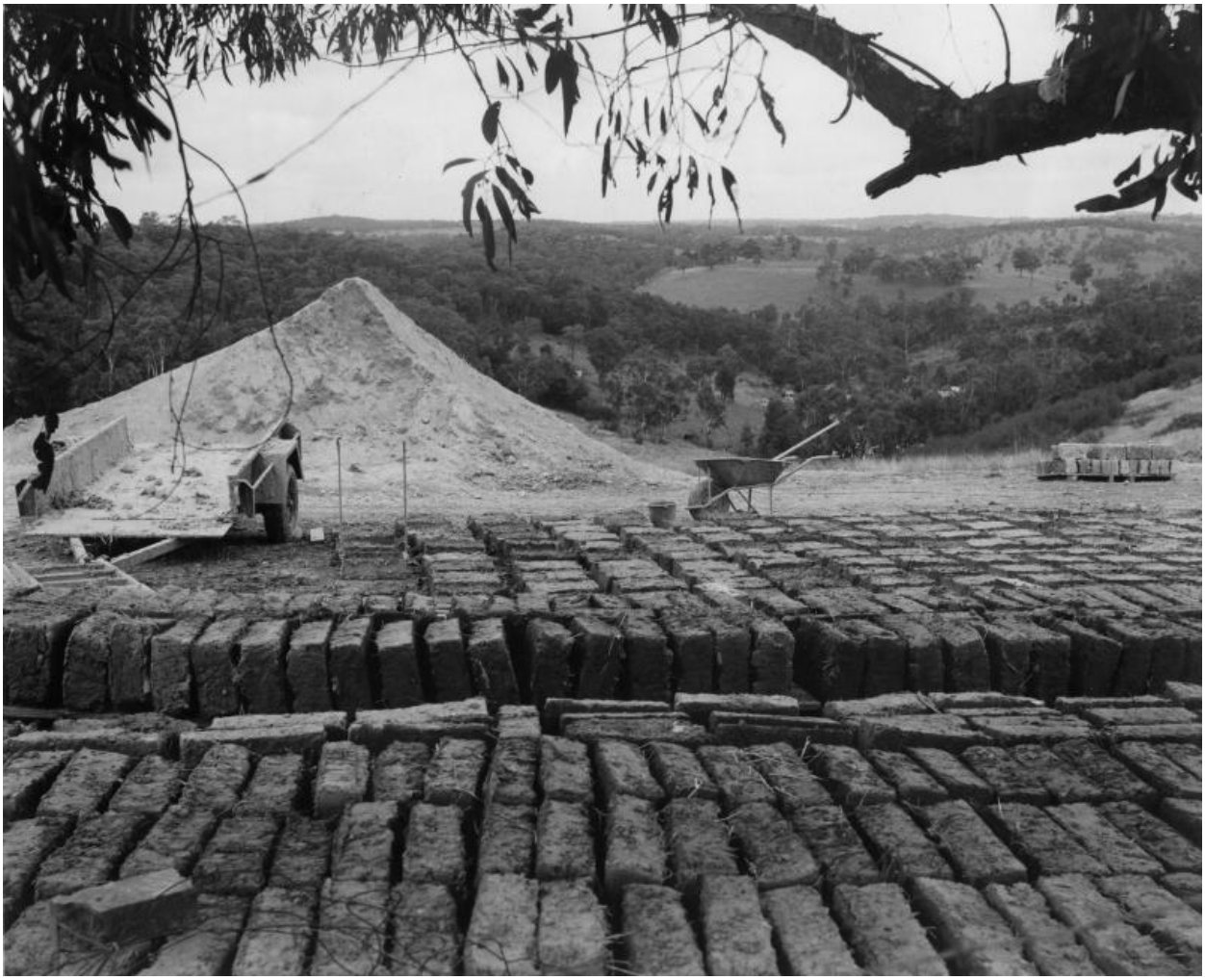
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Alistair Knox was born in 1912 in inner city Melbourne and moved out to Eltham in the 1940s, inspired like many young people to purchase an affordable block and escape the confines of his dreary job as a bank clerk. His vision was to start designing and building environmental homes that reflected both the individual tastes and values of their inhabitants and engage with the landscape they were being built on. During the lean postwar years conventional building materials were expensive and hard to come by, and Knox's (then) revolutionary solution

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was to use natural materials readily available in the shallow, clay-rich, hills of Eltham where alternative people were beginning to move and build.

Following in the footsteps of the local artist's colony Montsalvat created by Justus Jorgensen, which had begun building medieval gothic-inspired housing out of stone and *pisé de terre* (which literally translates to 'earth in place', now known as cob or rammed earth) in the 1930s, Knox later wrote that he was inspired to create "a whole new way of looking at how we may live, particularly as we watch the promise of the postwar world dissolving before our eyes into depression and despair." In 1946 he completed a course in draftsmanship and by the following year began building low-cost housing made from the timber and clay material from the sites being selected, a concept previously maligned in the push for modernity and progress. Joined by a group of local artists, writers and actors—many of whom became quite celebrated, such as landscape gardeners Gordon Ford and Edna Walling—Knox re-established the traditions of earth building in Victoria, and subsequently Australia.



Mud bricks drying in the sun in the hills of Eltham (1960s)

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The ever-growing community of artisans and laborers eagerly joined in this new drive towards owner-built mud-brick houses. This movement reflected the popular values of the Eltham community which gave preference to semi-rural alternative lifestyle experiences over the more rigid postwar atmosphere identified and epitomized by the suburbs and the city. Amongst this cohort, it was widely felt that existing housing sought no harmony between the land and the homes of those who lived there. Knox's designs sought a vision whereby the landscapes and the houses became one, where "reaching Stringybarks held back the undisciplined bush, shadowed windows peered through the wild hair of Casuarina [trees]." (Alan Marshall in Alistair Knox, xi.)

Environmental building emerged as a viable alternative that took personalized values for engaging with the immediate environment and expressed this in (mud) bricks and mortar, symbolizing a change in mentality towards the native landscape. This change is remarkable considering the prevalent aesthetic and attitude in postwar Australia that was famously critiqued by the celebrated architect Robin Boyd as the "Australian Ugliness"—describing reference to the endless suburbs of uniform brick housing that dictated through their very design a uniform interface between people and their immediate surroundings. Knox's mud-brick buildings are now considered synonymous with Eltham's landscape, continuing to inspire and design appropriate environmental housing and landscape designs well into the 1980s. Over his career he created a very large body of work; approximately 1,260 documented buildings, including suburban estates, halls, colleges, landscapes and over six hundred houses. His philosophy and vision were encapsulated in everything he created, as noted in his entry in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*: "above all, he presented a vision of integrating the earth's elements into landscapes and living environments."

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Margot Knox doing some paving (1960s)

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Unlike the first colonists who sought to distinguish themselves from their immediate landscape (and its inhabitants), Knox's environmental buildings sought to reconnect people with their natural surroundings, promoting a simpler and more conscious lifestyle, what he termed "the background for creative living." Using local skills and materials and designing houses more suited for the extreme Australian climate, Knox promoted an alternative lifestyle and philosophical framework that challenged the postwar mantra of unlimited progress and unfettered materialism. Building with mud is now often viewed as a rational response to building within a society more attuned to the excesses of a carbon-driven economy. In the postwar period it represented a vital platform for alternative thinkers to evaluate their relationship to their immediate landscape and the society at large. Though often sidelined as a bespoke housing style, the history of natural building provides an important window to understand the changing sensibilities of Australians to their immediate surroundings—part of a broader narrative of how Australians are learning to live with, and not just in, the environment.

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Further readings:

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- Howard, Ted. *Mud and Man: A History of Earth Buildings in Australasia.* Melbourne: Earthbuild Publications, 1992.
- Knox, Alistair. *We Are What We Stand On: A Personal History of the Eltham Community.* Eltham, VIC: Adobe Press, 1980.
- Moore, Tony. *Dancing with Empty Pockets: Australia's Bohemians since 1860.* Millers Point, NSW: Pier 9, 2012.
- Troy, Patrick N. *A History of European Housing in Australia.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Related links:

- Alistair Knox in the Australian Dictionary of Biography (ADB)
  http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/knox-alistair-samuel-12750
- Robin Boyd in the Australian Dictionary of Biography (ADB)
  http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/boyd-robin-gerard-penleigh-9560

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About the author:

Rachel Goldlust
Rachel Goldlust traces the history of self-sufficient living in Australia from the nineteenth century to the present. Her

recently completed PhD thesis explores the social and environmental history of living off-grid as a way for urban dwellers in Australia to connect with the land. Before pursuing her PhD, Rachel undertook a master's degree in social sciences focusing on sustainable planning. She then worked as a municipal-town planner and taught sustainability and environmental education. Rachel is passionate about oral history, environmental and social justice, travel, storytelling, and bringing sustainable-living ideas to wider audiences through her work and writing.
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9102-7430

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