



The suburb Bob built

Renowned architect Bob Dickson, above, helped create a 20th century escape from suburbia – and there are now calls to have his piece of paradise protected. Heritage writer **TIM LLOYD** reports.

SIXTY years ago architect Bob Dickson decided he should design his new house, its block of land, the surrounding streetscape – and the whole neighbourhood.

Dickson died in April this year, but his son, prominent Sydney architect Nigel Dickson, believes the suburb that Bob built should be protected. He compares this part of Rostrevor with Castlecraig in Sydney or Eltham in Melbourne.

"To me, this is one of the important touchstones in how Australians live in their very special localities," he says. "The Australian circumstance."

We are standing in Marola Ave in Morialta. The immediate five houses overlooking us are were designed and built by Bob Dickson. All of them are different, but identifiably by the same hand.

The street, meanwhile, is unlike any other suburban Adelaide street. It winds up the hill. Tall gum trees don't line the street so much as form a linear park in the generous public spaces between houses and the road. To complete the landscape a small creek finds its way down the middle of the public space, and is obligingly gurgling merrily.

The locals call the precinct and its 250 houses "Morialta Community" because it is so distinct in its history and character from the rest of the suburb of Rostrevor.

Bob and Lillian Dickson first bought their house block here, like many post-war couples, with a 100 pound down payment. But instead of the drear of suburbia, he designed and built his own house in 1951, and it won national and international recognition. It was

built to the principles that would mark his life's work. His buildings used locally-sourced materials cost-effectively, and without gimmicks or formality.

His houses are often clad in wood, with big glass doors and windows to make the most of northern light and southern views. Central inside features include massive stone fireplaces and chimneys and straw-panel ceilings under flat iron roofs. They are immediately and radically different from the usual suburban Adelaide house. Bob Dickson's large-scale architecture includes the University of Adelaide Union Buildings, the Arkaba Hotel, and many SA council headquarters and golf course clubs.

Morialta is an unusual corner of Adelaide suburbia.

Dickson's part belongs to the suburb of Rostrevor in the Campbelltown City Council, but Morialta is surrounded by Adelaide Hills Council areas.

Morialta Residents' Society president Peter Sydenham, says in the years before GPS

navigation, an emergency call would bring both the volunteer Adelaide Hills ambulance and the metropolitan ones, so great was the confusion.

"Rostrevor is on the plains, and we are in the Hills face," says Sydenham.

"The last time we applied to Campbelltown Council to be recognised as Morialta was about 10 years ago, but someone got wind of it in the press and said we were snobs."

His suburb of "Morialta" is shaped like a triangle, with its longest boundary being Fourth Creek, which flows over the spectacular Morialta Falls upstream before coming past Wandilla Drive and Bob Dickson's house.

Bob built his house in 1951. He told his brother, Graham Dickson, that some nearby blocks of land were going for sale and with another friend they bought them and had houses designed for them by Bob. Soon others moved into his houses in the suburb, including politician Neal Blewett

and academic Professor George Turner. In all, 10 houses on three streets comprise the Dickson collection.

By the early 1960s, Bob had realised if the land on the opposite side of Wandilla Drive and backing on to Fourth Creek was sold for housing the creek would soon turn into a channel full of rubbish tossed over back fences.

Rather than engage in an uncertain campaign to protect the creek, he led other locals in buying all the blocks between the street and the creek.

He spent the next five years lobbying the State Government, which eventually bought them along with other land to expand the Morialta Conservation Park. With the southern side of the precinct now protected, Bob continued his campaign to beautify Morialta.

The reason tall trees truly make this neighbourhood green is that Bob helped convinced the entire neighbourhood to pay for the

undergrounding of powerlines. Their campaign began after the Ash Wednesday bushfires in 1983, when ETSA was clearing many trees from powerline easements. By 1990 the locals could hold a street party to celebrate the removal of all Stobie poles and overhead wires.

Bob persuaded the local council to stone line the gutters rather than use concrete formwork helping to give the roads "soft" edges and informal, grassy footpaths. The neighbours have helped with the public landscaping of the streets and particularly the little stream on Marola Ave.

By now the residents of "Morialta" were a well-organised lobby group.

In 1990 they began a campaign for the government to buy sections of the hills face overlooking the Morialta Falls Conservation Park, and owned by developers. It took nearly 20 years, but the land is now part of the natural land around Morialta Falls, ensuring that it won't be overlooked by housing. It means the "Morialta" neighbourhood ends in native scrub to the ridge line.

Claims for recognition of Bob Dickson's work are strongly supported and aided by other residents.

They include Graham Dickson, who still lives in his original house, and particularly Peter Sydenham.

They join Nigel Dickson in the street to discuss their attempts to give the area its own identity and protection, and hopefully one day have it declared a heritage zone.

"This neighbourhood has all the hallmarks of an area where people are trying to say what's important about Australia," says Nigel.

"What makes it different to

other places? There was a rejection of the quarter acre block – the suburban treeless plain that was pilloried by Bruce Petty's cartoons or Robyn Boyd descriptions as the suburban ugliness.

"It was about saying there is an alternate way. We can co-exist with nature and I think that's as relevant today as it was at the time and it's up to each generation to deal with in its own way.

"The other thing that concerns me is that 20th century architecture is disappearing very quickly. We keep the Georgian, we keep the Victorian, but we are not recognising the high points of the '60s, '70s and '80s."

Nigel Dickson cut his teeth in urban architecture by spending years in New York, helping with the transformation of parts of Lower Manhattan. For the last 20 years he has been doing the same in Sydney as a partner in Dickson Rothschild, designing the sometimes palatial new residences with harbour views.

His sister Sara has moved into the family home in Wandilla Drive.

Nigel was also in Adelaide to hold discussions with the State Government about ways of protecting the characteristics of Morialta's little suburb through a heritage listing.

"They encouraged us to hire a historian to look into it," he says. "I think what is touching people is not just the houses but the landscapes of the area, and the way the place has an interesting history aside from the houses."

Graham Dickson likes a quotation about the suburb his brother had so much say in: "It's not part of suburbia; it's an escape from it," he says.



STREET APPEAL: Bob Dickson's brother Graham and son Nigel with Morialta Residents' Society president Peter Sydenham.

Picture: SIMON CROSS