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Abstract

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Keywords

counterculture, Martin Sharp, Dada, pop culture

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'Let's paint a jungle on the walls....' Third grade boy, Freestone - Advertisements for a
Counterculture, *Progressive Architecture*, July 1970.

'[The Yellow House] is probably one of the greatest pieces of conceptual art ever achieved.' Martin
Sharp, September 1971.



Figure 1. The Yellow House, Sydney, circa 1971. Photograph: Greg Weight.

Abstract: Martin Sharp's Yellow House represents a transitional phase in the countercultural movement within Australia, from the peace and love Utopian ideals of the Sixties through to the disenchantment and technological changes of the Seventies. Inspired by Vincent Van Gogh's similarly titled building and aborted artist community in the south of France during the 1880s, and the British Arts Lab movement of the late 1960s, a 3-storey Victorian era terrace building in Sydney was transformed into a work of art, living museum, experimental art gallery and performance space, under the liberating and libertine guidance of Martin Sharp - an artist who had experienced some of the extraordinary cultural changes taking place in London and Europe between 1966-69. The Yellow House was a unique expression of the counterculture's disparate elements through a redundant example of the built environment, namely a former art gallery and guest house facing the threat of demolition. Art and architecture fused with lifestyle and culture within a veritable rabbit warren of rooms and performance spaces. Though innately ephemeral, the venture succeeded – between May 1970 and March 1973 - in providing an expressive outlet for a disparate group of counterculture artists, performers and commentators.

Yellow House - Origins

In 1970 Martin Sharp - a former University of Sydney architecture student (1961), graduate of the National Art School (1963) and co-editor from 1963 through to 1968 of the landmark Australian and British counterculture magazine *OZ* - returned from London where between June 1966 and January 1969 he produced a series of stunning Pop art posters and record covers, whilst also helping set in place the basic template for modern magazine graphic design through London *OZ*.¹ Sharp had left Australia for London and Europe with the aim of escaping its stifling conservatism for the liberating freedoms of the Continent. While away, he formulated ideas, in collaboration with locals and expatriates, around how to effect change in his homeland. One of Sharp's first tasks upon arriving back in Sydney was to recreate the legendary Yellow House of Dutch painter Vincent Van Gogh.² It was Van Gogh's original vision during the 1880s to set up a retreat for artists in the sunny south of France, where he and his colleagues could work in true collaboration.³ Van Gogh's Yellow House was a simple, 2-storey building in Arles, attached to a house and adjacent to a restaurant (painted pink), with 2 rooms on each floor. Sharp had a similar vision, though one which was very much updated and attuned with contemporary culture. The Arts Lab movement in England was the most obvious precursor, beginning with the Drury Lane Arts Lab alternative arts centre set up by Jim Haynes in

¹ Ted Owen, *High Art: a history of the psychedelic poster*, Sanctuary Publishing, 1999. Julia Bigham, Julia, Day-Go Mind Blow, *Eye: The International Magazine of Graphic Design*, 11(42), 2001, 32-43.

² James Gleeson, James, Interview with Martin Sharp, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 1979. Accessed 17 July 2015, <http://nga.gov.au/Research/Gleeson/pdf/Sharp.pdf>.

³ Martin Gayford, *The Yellow House: Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Nine Turbulent Weeks in Arles*, Little, Brown & Co., New York, 2006.

1967.⁴ That facility included a cinema, gallery space, theatre, film workshop and drop-in centre / accommodation. It operated through to 1969, and spawned a number of similar centres throughout England and continental Europe, including David Bowie's Beckenham Arts Lab in 1970.⁵

Sharp, following on discussions in London with Australian cinematographer Albie Thoms, brought these ideas to Sydney where he selected a derelict former art gallery and 3-storey, Victorian era terrace building at 57-59 Macleay Street, Potts Point. Influenced by Magritte, Van Gogh, Picasso, Hokusai, Dada and the Surrealists, over the next three years Sharp and an eclectic group of artists transformed the building into both work of art and performance space. The walls, floors and exterior were repainted (the latter yellow), remodelled, and turned into art galleries, living and office areas, a puppet theatre, cabaret, concert venue, café, school and cinema. The post-Woodstock, pre-Nimbin, Aquarian Age participants made use of a traditional piece of inner city architecture to accommodate the many and varied means of expression then at play, culminating in the building's final manifestation as a countercultural commune wherein Utopian visions were enacted. Martin Sharp's Yellow House was more successful than Van Gogh's dream – only Paul Gauguin visited the Yellow House in Arles, and that tumultuous encounter resulted in Van Gogh losing a piece of his ear. Numerous artists, members of the counterculture, and the public engaged with the building between April 1970 and March 1973. Its adaptation and use was an expression of the Dada philosophy of anarchy and the everyday nature of art within the built environment. Intellectual, practical, artistic and liveable – the Sydney Yellow House was, for a brief period, a living, breathing community. The

⁴ 'The Arts Lab Movement,' *International Times*, 1(66), October 10, 1969; 'Arts Lab,' *Wikipedia*, 2016. Accessed 1 April 2016, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arts_Lab.

⁵ Mary Finnigan, *Psychedelic Suburbia: David Bowie and the Beckenham Arts Lab*, Jorvic Press, 2016.

ability of the building to accommodate a wide range of activities, from performance and printing through exhibition, entertainment and accommodation, reveals the adaptability of both it and the numerous participants then engaged with the counterculture. It also points to the significant communal ethos of the era, as seen in later agrarian events such as the 1973 Aquarius Festival at Nimbin and creation of the environmentally friendly Autonomous House at the University of Sydney in 1974.

In seeking to understand what the Sydney Yellow House was, from whence it evolved, and what it achieved, a reliance on traditional sources of research is of limited use. Published accounts of the activities of the Yellow House provide only brief overviews. A catalogue from the Art Gallery of New South Wales 1990 exhibition which attempted to recreate elements of the Yellow House experience is the most concise to date, alongside the published reminiscences of cinematographer Albie Thoms.⁶ Two recent biographies of Martin Sharp include substantial sections on the Yellow House.⁷ A few magazine articles on that artist also include snippets of information regarding the Yellow House. In the present instance, use has been made of first-hand accounts and reminiscences by participants in both the Yellow House and its London precursor The Pheasantry, including Roger Foley, Axel Sutinen, Richard Neville, Greg Weight, Philippe Mora and Sam Bienstock. For example, Axel Sutinen in 2016 produced a blog on his Yellow House experience during 1972-3, and Roger Foley has spoken at length

⁶ Johanna Mendellsohn, *The Yellow House 1970-72*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1990; Thoms, Albie, *My Generation*, Sydney, 2013.

⁷ Lowell Tarling, *Sharp – Road to Abraxas: Part One 1942-1979. The biography of Martin Sharp as told to Lowell Tarling*, ETT Imprint, Exile Bay, 2016; Joyce Morgan, *Martin Sharp: his life and times*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2017.

with the author on the subject.⁸ The Yellow House experience remains vivid in the memory of many of its then-young participants, due to both its intensity and the freedoms offered in regards to performance and art. This article seeks to understand that attachment by investigating the origins of Sharp's Yellow House, its operations and ultimate influence.

Counterculture (un)contained

The counterculture of the 1960s and early 1970s revealed itself through a variety of forms - art, architecture, graphic design, music, writing, protest and alternate lifestyles, to name but a few.⁹ All grew out of a post-World War Two youth-based rebellion against conservative values and traditional norms. This was initially brought to light in films such as Marlon Brando's *The Wild One* (1953) and James Dean's *Rebel Without A Cause* (1955). It was followed by the subsequent explosion onto the youth scene of rock and roll at the end of the decade, led by artists such as Elvis Presley and Chuck Berry. Integral to the evolving trend towards youthful rebellion and alternative lifestyles were the cultural revolutions taking place during the 1960s in Western societies such as Europe, America, sections of Asia including Japan, South America and Australasia. The sexual revolution, widespread use of hallucinogenic and recreational drugs, the anti-war movement, psychedelia and Utopian dreams – perhaps best seen in the Beatles mantra "All you need is love" - were some of the more

⁸ Axel Sutinen, *My Yellow House experience* [blog], 23 July 2016,

<http://yellowhousesutinen.blogspot.com.au/>, accessed 12 September 2016.

⁹ Elizabeth Nelson, *The British Counter-Culture, 1966-73: A Study of the Underground Press*, Macmillan, London, 1989; Christopher Grunberg, *Summer of Love: Art of the Psychedelic Era*, Tate Gallery, London, 2005.

public and controversial elements of this period of extreme societal change. Related innovations passed almost unnoticed at the time, relegated to the fringes of the underground media or denigrated as the purview of hippiedom. Many now form an integral part of everyday life in the new millennium, including issues such as environmental sustainability, enhancement of civil, political and moral rights, the use of innovative technologies and adaptations to the built environment with the aim of energy efficiency. These ideas and movements could, at the time, be integrated, overlapping, individual or communal. Freedom of expression and experimentation was actively and widely encouraged. Art and architecture became ephemeral to the mainstream, yet integral to a new, alternate society often referred to as the counterculture, though it was never a singular entity.¹⁰

A good example, and one previously not considered in any detail, is the relationship between a leading figure of the counterculture - Australian artist Martin Sharp - and the built environment. Sharp is internationally known for his involvement with the often controversial *OZ* magazine between 1963-73, the production of a series of psychedelic posters such as the Bob Dylan *Blowing in the Mind* (1967) and an exploding *Jimi Hendrix* (1968), record covers such as Cream's *Disraeli Gears* (1967) and *Wheels of Fire* (1968), plus a large body of work through to his death in 2013. He is not generally connected with architectural movements, spatial design or built forms. However, he often worked closely with his physical environment and moved, occasionally, beyond the palette, canvas and sculptured piece onto bricks and mortar. The most well-known example is the Yellow House, for which he was the primary instigator. The building became home to a disparate community of artists,

¹⁰ Margaret Smith and David Crossley, *The Way Out: Radical Alternatives in Australia*, Lansdowne Press, Melbourne, 1975; Andrew Blauvelt, *Hippie Modernism*, Walker Art Centre, Minneapolis, 2015.

musicians, dancers, puppeteers, performers, poets, photographers, writers, student architects, drifters, exiles and young people looking for an alternative to the drabness of society around them. Sharp was an inspiration and guiding force for many of its activities. He, along with like-minded colleagues such as Albie Thoms, generally encouraged freedom of expression and, more especially, participatory engagement with the building internal spaces and physical structure.

The Yellow House was not Sharp's only example of transforming the built environment - he also worked in film and theatre set design, both in Australia and in England, on building facades, and later in the general preservation and renovation of Sydney's Luna Park fun fair. One contemporary newspaper report referred to the Yellow House as "an artistic Luna Park".¹¹ During its peak period of activity in 1971, it was a countercultural urban commune and space transformed. Refugees from the mainstream found inspiration and sometimes a home within its walls. When British comedian Marty Feldman dropped by late one night in 1971, what was he looking for? Did he find it by the time he finished breakfast the next day? And what of the American draft dodger who was resident for a couple of months at the end of that year, and took photographs; or the London raconteur on the run from the Kray Brothers; or even members of Pink Floyd in town for a concert, perhaps seeking to engage with Sharp around issues of UFOs and "Saucers full of Secrets"?¹² The Yellow House was transformed from a simple, run down exhibition space Martin Sharp walked into during February 1970, after returning from 4 years of intense activity in London, into a countercultural node and experimental multimedia space. It became a focus for the forces of change brewing in the Emerald

¹¹ Laurie Thomas, 'The magic of an artistic Luna Park,' *The Australian*, 5 October 1971.

¹² Michael Organ, 'Martin Sharp, LSD and UFOs [blog], 7 July 2016. Available URL:

<http://sharpufos.blogspot.com.au/>.

City (Sydney) during those years between the first moon landing (July 1969) and the liberating politics and breath of fresh air that swept across Australia in December 1972 with the election of the Whitlam Labor government. Prior to the Yellow House, Sharp's education in the frontline of public opinion and alternative cultures was filtered through magazines such as *OZ* from 1963, and a period of international fame whilst based in London between 1966-9. Art and architecture were influences, and there was, as he noted, "something in the air" which drew him to do what he did and bring others along with him.¹³

The Australian Ugliness and *OZ*

Martin Sharp was born in Sydney in 1942. He showed an interest in art from an early age, encouraged by a mother who worked with collage, and later by Justin O'Brien, art teacher at Cranbrook High School. During his formative years he developed a life-long interest in art history, with twentieth century movements such as German Expressionism, Dada and Surrealism revealed through his earliest works. Upon leaving school, in 1960 he attended the National Art School (NAS) at Darlinghurst, Sydney. At his father's behest, he also undertook a year of study at the University of Sydney's Faculty of Architecture during 1961 before returning to the NAS. As his family were financially well off Sharp did not need to work in the traditional sense, however from 1962 he found employment as a freelance cartoonist for *The Bulletin*, *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Australian* and undertook similar work for student newspapers such as the University of Sydney's *Honi Soit* and the National Art School's *Arty Wild Oat*. Sharp had a biting wit which he was able to express through

¹³ Norman Hathaway and Dan Nadel, *Electrical Banana: Masters of Psychedelic Art*, Damiani, Bologna, 2010.

black and white art and writing. He also had a rebellious, *laissez faire*, libertarian attitude that was in many ways typical of young, urban Australians at the time. Open to change - to the words of Bob Dylan's famous song *The Times They Are A Changin'* - he found an outlet through work with the landmark countercultural magazine *OZ*. Co-edited by Sharp and writers Richard Neville and Richard Walsh, it was first published in Sydney on April Fool's Day 1963. The magazine initially set out to cast a satirical lens over Sydney society, lampooning the conservative establishment and attacking issues such as censorship, conservative politics, monarchy and police corruption. However, before long stories on the Vietnam War, sex, music, society mores, racism, women's issues and recreational drug use began to appear, morphing the magazine into part of the burgeoning counterculture. From its earliest issues the built environment was not exempt from satirical and critical attack by the *OZ* editors. For example, issue number 6 of March 1964 featured Neville and two others purporting to use as a urinal the Tom Bass sculpture on the side of the recently opened P&O building in Sydney. That building was referred to within the attached commentary as an example of "the Australian Ugliness", owing in part to "the severe drabness of its sandstone facade."



Figure 2. OZ magazine cover, issue no.6, February 1964. Richard Neville and two others pretend to use the Tom Bass sculpture on the P&O building, Sydney, as a urinal.

The image and issue content caused outrage amongst the establishment and eventually saw the editors brought before court on charges of issuing an obscene publication with no intellectual merit. Art and architecture were very much part of Sharp's worldview, with even the humble public toilet the subject of one of his full-page OZ cartoons. He also produced a cartoon accompanying the article by Geoffrey Lehmann on the Blues Point Tower located on Sydney harbour, adjacent to the landmark

Sydney Harbour Bridge.¹⁴ Designed by well-known architect Harry Seidler, it was the subject of much controversy, and remains so to this day, being cited as one of the city's ugliest buildings.¹⁵ Sharp's cartoon was titled 'Harry Seidler's Functional Ugliness' and portrayed the architect as a naked female, after Modigliani, revelling in narcissistic beauty. Sharp's precise views on the architectural work of Seidler are not known, however the cartoon most likely reflects his support for Lehmann's critical comments. A quotation in the article from Seidler's 1954 book on architectural design, which denigrated decoration, would also likely have raised the hackles of the young artist:

*Decoration should be OF a thing not ON a thing. A riot of flowery patterns so prevalent today only succeeds in destroying the form of the object to which they are applied and result generally in a tasteless conglomeration of shapes.*¹⁶

Seidler was a student of Walter Gropius, founder of the Bauhaus School in Germany between 1919-33. Sharp, a student of early twentieth century European art movements and fan of German Expressionism was aware of the important crossover between art, architecture and craft promoted by the Bauhaus. He would also have observed the austere line and lack of ornamentation manifest in its architectural forms. Throughout the 1960s, Sharp revelled in the decorative detail of collage and psychedelia, often masking his satire behind their apparent prettiness. Another architecture-related target of the *OZ* editors was the abysmal treatment by local politicians of the designer of the Sydney Opera House, Joern Utzon. Sharp and *OZ* supported the talented Utzon and lambasted those

¹⁴ Geoffrey Lehmann, 'Harry Seidler's Functional Ugliness,' *OZ*, May 1963. Accessed 20 March 2014.

Available URL: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/ozsydney/2/>.

¹⁵ Prue Miller, 'The ugliest buildings in Sydney,' *Daily Telegraph*, July 27, 2015.

¹⁶ Harry Seidler, *Houses, Interiors and Projects*, Associated General Publications, Sydney, 1954.

bureaucrats whose petty-mindedness interfered with the building's construction and the architect's vision. Utzon was forced to withdraw as chief architect in February 1966, amidst local protest in support of his work. Sharp's final *OZ* issue before leaving Australia that month featured on its front cover a reference to this nationally embarrassing debacle. The use by Sharp of iconic Australian cartoon character Boofhead suggests, through a speech bubble, that whilst he does not care much for opera, he recognized the genius of Utzon's design (Nuttall 2006). The point is that any fool (i.e. 'boofhead') could see this. As a parting shot, Sharp's image was powerful in its reference to the backward and conservative attitudes of Australian society, art and architecture that he now sought to leave behind.

The Streets of London

Change your surroundings and you change yourself (Faralbone Institute, Berkeley 1970).

*Remaking one's physical environment was the essential route to achieving both an authentic identity, and freedom.*¹⁷

When Martin Sharp and his fellow *OZ* editor Richard Neville travelled overland to London at the beginning of 1966 they had no plans to publish a British version of the magazine, however circumstances drew them to such a fate. London *OZ* appeared on the streets in February 1967 and went on to become a flagship for the counterculture through to its final issue in 1973. Whilst Sydney

¹⁷ Glen Hill, 'Discipline Dodgers: Freedom and Control in the Intentional Communities of Australia's Counterculture,' in *Proceedings of the 30th Annual Conference of the Society of Australian Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand*, 2013, 569-581.

OZ had been mainly black and white, set in letterpress, satirical and Australian, the London version was psychedelic, offset printed in multi-colour and with a focus on the myriad countercultural issues then sweeping across the globe. London and Europe also opened up a new world of art, architecture and design for Sharp upon his arrival there in the middle of 1966. London was swinging, and it was full of colour and excitement. The streets were alive with activity and facade decoration. A good example was the famous *Granny Takes a Trip* fashion shop on the King's Road. Opened in April 1966 and operated by Sharp's friend, the artist and designer Nigel Waymouth, its small shop front featured an ever-changing facade by Waymouth and Michael English, his partner in the design team known as Hapshash and the Coloured Coat. Other examples included the Beatles' *Apple* boutique, which, during November 1967, was painted in a multi-coloured psychedelic design by the Dutch artist collective The Fool, and the facade to the *Lord John* clothing store painted by the English design team of Binder, Dudley & Edwards. In 1968 Sharp undertook his own shop front commission for *The Sweet Shop*, a London fashion boutique.¹⁸ The original *Sweet Shop* frontage was boarded up and painted white when it first opened in 1967 and the business operated as such for about a year. However, sometime during late 1968, as part of the relaunch, which took place, early in 1969, Sharp repainted the facade in his own inimitable style.

¹⁸ Anonymous, 'The Sweet Shop and Chelsea in the 1960s by Laura Jamieson,' *A Dandy in Aspic*

[blog], March 2012. Accessed 20 March 2014. Available URL:

<http://dandyinaspic.blogspot.com.au/2012/03/sweet-shop-and-chelsea-in-1960s-by.html>.



Figure 3. *The Sweet Shop*, 28 Balantyre Street, London, c.1968. Painted facade by Martin Sharp.

The only record of his work is an unsourced, black and white newspaper cutting. It reveals a design featuring a two-coloured background with white figures running across the middle portion and a central image of a sheeted figure standing on a white ball with an inverted Vincent Van Gogh chair on its head. The motifs reflect, in part, Sharp's cover artwork for the September 1968 edition of London *OZ* magazine (issue number 15). That work included an adaptation of an early film strip in the form of a figure - in this instance The Little Prince - running and jumping. The figures in the *OZ* cover are similar to the *Sweet Shop* facade, only running in the opposite direction. It is possible that this blue colouring, and a lighter shade, were used on the shop front by Sharp, though the precise detail is not known. The *Sweet Shop* running male figures appear to have balloon-like coneheads,

with bubble extensions. They are based on the famous Eadweard Muybridge strip of motion study photographs from 1887 of a naked man running. The famous Van Gogh chair (1888) - in this instance inverted for the *Sweet Shop* shopfront - was also a motif which featured in Sharp's art and collages from the same period. For Sharp, life - as in art, architecture and everyday activity, including friendships - was collage, whereby disparate elements were brought together, forming a unified, unique and stimulating whole. He was not afraid of the serendipitous interaction of people, places and things. In fact, he encouraged it throughout his life, just as he sought it within his art.

The Pheasantry

Between June 1966 and the end of 1969 Martin Sharp worked from a base known as The Pheasantry - a grandiose, though run down, mid-eighteenth century, Georgian brick and stucco 3-storey building located just off the King's Road, London. It housed a 1930s era nightclub in the basement and was the setting for the Oliver Reed film *The Party's Over* (1963). It was heritage listed in 1969, though demolition was a threat during the early 1970s. Fortunately, it survives as both a pizza restaurant and jazz club. The Pheasantry was a hive of activity during Sharp's period of residence. His neighbours included writers Anthony Haden-Guest and Germaine Greer - the latter engaged downstairs on her landmark book *The Female Eunich*; Australian photographer Robert Whitaker, then working with the Beatles after being brought from Australia by Brian Epstein in 1964; film maker and artist Philippe Mora; raconteur, print maker, jazz expert and associate of the Kray Brothers, David Litvinoff; and English guitarist Eric Clapton from the rock group Cream, who shared the upstairs studio with Sharp.¹⁹

¹⁹ Keiron Pim, *Jumpin' Jack Flash: David Litvinoff and the Rock 'N' Roll Underworld*, Jonathan Cape, London, 2016.

By the end of 1969 the Pheasantry's walls were heavily decorated with art by Sharp, Mora and Clapton, with large areas of colour and assorted decorative elements. Parties at the Pheasantry were reached through a snake-like tube. A sense of the decor can be gained from the photospread contained in the March 1970 edition of Italian architecture and design magazine *Domus*. Therein we see the red and gold painted walls and, through a doorway, Sharp working on one of his large paintings. In another room, the walls and ceiling are painted with artworks and covered with photographs and posters.

A series of colour drawings from late 1969 by Birgitta Bjerke - former resident of the Pheasantry and noted designer of crocheted wearable art - survive, providing evidence of the richly painted and partially decorated interior. This multi-storey artist community and alternate lifestyle was a foretaste of what was to take place in the Yellow House, Sydney. In addition, Sharp's experience as art editor of the London edition of *OZ* from January 1967 through to the end of 1968, and ongoing participation in the magazine's publication, undoubtedly brought to his attention the many facets of the counterculture then finding expression around the world. He was part-hippie in his rejection of the violence of the Vietnam War, a deep cynicism towards the media and military industrial complex, adoption of libertarian views in regards to sexuality, freedom of expression and the use of hallucinogenic drugs such as LSD and hashish, and an interest in esoteric issues such as UFOs and tarot. Individual freedom of expression dominated his world view. Just as the art world did not accept psychedelia as a legitimate form of expression during the 1960s in the same way as it accepted Pop Art, so also alternate design and architectural reform was initially ignored or rejected during the

period in which the counterculture was developing.²⁰ Sharp and Mora were very much aware of this rejection and formed part of the anti-establishment movement which rejected the rejection and made use of popular culture forms to express themselves. As Mora recently noted:

At the time we were very conscious of the art establishment as being elitist in London and elsewhere which is why Mart and I believed in "democratic" works i.e. cheap to buy or see - posters, movies, comics etc. My personal contempt at the time for elitism culminated in my meat sculpture which Mart loved and helped me with. The idea was you could not sell it! This was part of our anti-establishment vibe.²¹

Martin Sharp's immersion in the counterculture only went so far. His gradual distancing from active involvement in *OZ* was a reflection of this. He was not overtly political, did not adopt planetary ecological views, and steered away from Eastern spirituality, turning instead, later in life, to the Anglican Church and its attractive - to him - mantra of *Eternity*, whilst occasionally dabbling in the esoteric. Nevertheless, he learnt a lot from, and in turn contributed a lot to, *OZ*. The London edition was a key member of the Underground Press Syndicate - a group of copyright free publications, which shared stories and content, giving voice to those innovations, ideas and issues not covered by mainstream media. For example, the 'Communal life in New America' montage in *OZ* number 30 from October 1970 featured Buckminster Fuller geodesic domes and elements of the alternative lifestyles being taken up across America and Western Europe by groups such as the hippies.

²⁰ Tina Rivers Ryan, 'Towards a stroboscopic history - an interview with Gerd Stern of USCO,' in Blauvelt, *op cit.*, 375-402.

²¹ Philippe Mora email to the author, 16 June 2016.



Figure 4. Communal life in New America, *OZ* magazine, London, no.30, October 1970.

This followed on the Summer of Love during 1967 and subsequent failure to realise earlier Utopian dreams within urban environments. When Canned Heat sang *Going Up the Country* at the Woodstock music and arts festival in July 1969 they were reflecting a general trend in American and Western youth culture and the counterculture, namely to get "back to the garden [of Eden]", as identified in Joni Mitchell's song *Woodstock* and made famous by the group Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young early in 1970. With this move away from cities such as San Francisco, New York, London and Paris - which had been hives of activity during the years 1965-8 - came the need for new forms of housing and new ways of living that would be at one with an increased awareness of the environment and the fragile ecology of the planet. The *Whole Earth Catalog*, with its stunning picture of Earth from space on the

cover, brought many of these elements together and was a reflection of the ever-changing times.²² Martin Sharp would have been aware of much of this, and his friend Richard Neville was one of the most prominent and eloquent commentators on the counterculture at that time, before he assumed his public role in Australia as a futurist and proponent of alternate ways of living. Sharp was cosmopolitan and city based, and though he did on occasion escape to the Mediterranean island of Ibiza for rest and recreation during his time away from Australia, he never went "bush" or communal after the Yellow House experience. Having said this, it should be noted that his life after 1977 in the large house Wirian in Sydney had communal aspects about it, with Sharp's spirit of openness evident though the number of visitors and short-term residents. Of their time together in London, friend and film maker Philippe Mora has noted:

Our discussions and interests at the Pheasantry were far reaching into many cultural subjects. It was a catalytic salon and everyone was welcome. Artists and musicians frequently visited us and Martin transferred some of this very democratic vibe to the Sydney Yellow House. Architecture was discussed from Albert Speer to Utzon. We fell in love with the Utzon opera house and disparaged the government hicks who vandalized his vision. Martin became quite friendly with the Utzon family. Architecture, sculpture, music, painting, film et al. were all one tapestry to us, intertwined and vibrant.²³

And so it was that at the end of 1969 Martin Sharp departed the Pheasantry for Australia.

²² Stewart Brand, *The Whole Earth Catalog - Access to Tools*, 1968.

²³ Mora, *op cit.*

The Yellow House 1970-3

Every part of the great building was given over to the festivities. There was dancing in every room Corridors and stairs were filled to overflowing with masks and dancing and music and laughter and tumult..... The walls were mostly hung with wild and cheerful paintings by the latest artists. All the world was there.... I went on thru the long corridors... There, on pitch black walls shone wicked garish lights... (Herman Hesse 1927).²⁴

Martin Sharp returned to Australia early in 1970 with two projects in mind: First, he sought to stage an exhibition of his works in the Holdsworth Gallery, Sydney; and secondly, he was hoping to create an artist community along the lines of Vincent Van Gogh's Yellow House in Arles during the 1880s. When the Holdsworth Gallery fell through, Sharp moved to the former - and then derelict - Clune Gallery in Potts Point, after securing an agreement from the new owner to make short-term use of the 3-storey terrace pending its redevelopment. This agreement continued through to the beginning of 1973. In the meantime, Sharp and his colleagues – who, according to Australian light show pioneer and Yellow House member Roger Foley eventually numbered more than 300 individual artists, performers and practitioners - set about making use of, and transforming the space. The subsequent story of the Yellow House is not of a failed venture or hippiedom out of control. It is, instead, one of success, of artistic endeavour unconstrained; of experiments, exhibitions and performance, all played out and put to rest. When the doors of the Yellow House were closed by Foley in March 1973 it was a natural progression. The counterculture had evolved. The Aquarius Festival of that year, and development of the Nimbin alternate lifestyle community, were new manifestations of the earlier "spirit in the air" Sharp had referred to, just as the Yellow House had been during its heyday in 1971.

²⁴ Herman Hesse, *Der Steppenwolf*, S. Fisher Verlag, 1927.

And what did that heyday look like? At its peak the uses of the Yellow House were diverse. For example, film maker Albie Thoms in July 1971 experimented with a form of what is now known as 'reality TV' when, using a primitive video camera, he and other members of the Yellow House recorded 30 hours of activity in and around the building. Labelled *Yellow TV*, it captured a blend of anarchy and directed activity, much of which is revealed in a 1-hour compilation prepared by Thoms in 1995 under the title *Akai Ghost Poems*.²⁵

The most extraordinary feature of the building, however, was the decor - the transformation of individual rooms according to various themes, such as the Stone Room, the Cloud Room, the Puppet Theatre, the Magritte Room, the Bonsai Room, the Womb Room and the Infinity Room. An extension of ideas developed in The Pheasantry, Sharp and his colleagues provided paint and inspiration to all who entered. As a result, by the middle of 1971 the building had been transformed inside and out, from Clune Gallery to Yellow House. Peter Wright set up an ultraviolet and kinetic light installation; Martin Sharp and others created the Stone Room, with its centre piece a reproduction by Sharp of Hokusai's iconic woodblock print *The Great Wave*. However, all was not peace and light during this developmental period, as, for example, Sharp came into conflict with fellow Australian artist Brett Whiteley over the precise depiction of the wave. Sharp preferred to reproduce Hokusai's original claw-like extensions of the foaming top of the wave, whilst Whiteley preferred a more erotic interpretation.

²⁵ Albie Thoms, *Akai Ghost Poems* [video], 1995. Duration 57:12. National Film & Sound Archive, Canberra. Available URL: <https://youtu.be/OtU6IICoxBM>.



Figure 5. Martin Sharp, Peter Kingston, Joyce & George Gittoes, *The Stone Room*, Yellow House, September 1971. Photograph: Greg Weight.

Elsewhere one could watch George Gittoes' puppet theatre, followed by a performance of a controversial play such as Michael McClure's *The Beard* (1967). There were also presentations of a cabaret, a Surreal Soiree, and screenings of cinema classics such as Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) and the avant-garde *Un Chien Andalou* (1928) by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dali on a special psychedelic screen made by Peter Wright. At the so-called Ginger Meggs School of Arts within the Yellow House, lessons were given in art, film making and writing by people such as Sharp and Thoms.

Perhaps as a manifestation of the evolving counterculture, during 1971 Peter Kingston, a University of New South Wales architecture student and friend of Sharp, installed - as part of his course - an experimental, bright orange geodesic dome above the rear courtyard of the Yellow House. This Buckminster Fuller-inspired addition to the building - which he named the Elephant House - served no function. It did, however, create a shelter beneath which Martin Sharp was able to give a press conference in September 1971 outlining the *raison d'etre* for the Yellow House and identifying its significance as "probably one of the greatest pieces of conceptual art ever achieved".²⁶



Figure 6. Peter Kingston, *Elephant Home*, a Buckminster Fuller-inspired, geodesic dome-like structure, located at the rear of the Yellow House, September 1971. Photograph: Sam Bienstock.

²⁶ Martin Sharp, [Interview], *GTK*, ABC Television, September 1971.

School groups experienced the building as it became part of the Sydney tourist trail for a brief period during 1971-2, and a full schedule of events was presented to the public.²⁷ One participant recently referred to the "fast flow of it all" and the "24 hour art-happening vibe of the Yellow House" (Axel Sutinen to the author, 18 June 2016). Such activity arose out of the general atmosphere of freedom of expression within the building. As film maker Albie Thoms notes in a 1971 interview for the ABC television program GTK:

*We never tell anyone to do anything.... It depends on the energy of the person as to what happens... That's the wonder of the place - it's in a constant state of non-control. Therefore anything can happen, any time of the day. You'll always be surprised in the Yellow House.*²⁸

In an early 1972 Yellow House newsletter, this openness and experimental philosophy was reiterated:

*Members are encouraged to take an active interest and exhibit their work or use their building in any way, for plays, concerts, environments, rehearsals or anything at all. NO judgements as to 'artistic merit' are made. We want everything from your collection of garbage and debris to a child's uncontrolled finger painting - whatever is in your mind. Do it. Now.*²⁹

²⁷ Michael Organ, The Sweet Shop [blog], 10 March 2014. Accessed 17 June 2016. Available URL: <http://sharpsweetshop.blogspot.com.au/>.

²⁸ The Yellow House, *GTK*, ABC Television September 1971. Duration: 6:45. Available URL: <https://youtu.be/SyLzzRXRbnA>.

²⁹ Richard Wright, The Yellow House [newsletter], 9 March 1972. Available URL: <http://archivesonline.uow.edu.au/nodes/view/2991>.

Martin Sharp was an active participant in the Yellow House through to early 1972 when he returned once again to England. By this stage, a number of artists were resident and individuals such as Albie Thoms and Sebastian Jorgensen were responsible for day-to-day management. Despite this, the energy of the venture began to dissipate during 1972 and in March of 1973 its doors were closed. Just as Sharp had moved on, so too had the times, with some of the Yellow House events during its last 12 months pointing a way to the future and the continuing evolution of the counterculture.

From Yellow House to Autonomous House

The young Finnish Asko (Axel) Sutinen was an artist resident at the Yellow House at the beginning of 1972 while undertaking an art course at the University of Sydney.³⁰ In collaboration with printmaker Colin Little, he produced a poster for the summer series of events held at the Yellow House. Little was also attending the University of Sydney at the time, and a member of the Tin Sheds workshop there. The Yellow House poster proved to be the first in the series by the group of artists that became known as the Earthworks Poster Collective. Sutinen described the poster's content as follows in language expressing an Aquarian aesthetic:

The idea came to me as a mythological Goddess being born out of the sea in front of a rising sun. Much like the Statue of Liberty by Frederic Bartholdi in New York (hence the reference to a

³⁰ Michael Organ, Yellow House poster 1972 - Axel Sutinen and Colin Little: from Yellow House to the Tin Sheds [blog], 7 December 2015. Accessed 17 June 2016. Available URL:

<http://yellowhouseposter72.blogspot.com.au/>.

ray-like crown), she was guiding the way to a new creative, prosperous and peaceful open culture. But my version [presented] her being born naked from the water (as the goddess Aphrodite who was born from the foam of the waves), and surrounded by UFOs and a floating Egyptian Great Pyramid. She is holding the trident of Neptune with a waving flag of victory in her right hand. So it was like a rebirth of a new culture into a more universal state of being. The exhibition titles and names of the artists were half hidden texts in the cyclical waves.³¹

The Earthworks Poster Collective series of posters was produced out of the Tin Sheds through to the 1980s and comprised some of the most innovative and controversial graphic designs and political commentary of the period. Sutinen also noted in regards to the selection of the name:

Earthworks Collective was chosen because it had allusions to an holistic planetary awareness, ancient monumental structures like the Great Pyramid & Stonehenge, and in modern art works like The Spiral Jetty by Robert Smithson that was made in 1970..... Also there was at the Tin Sheds a strong alternative-architectural awareness. Next door was "Autonomous House", designed with sustainable technology to be completely "Off the grid". And soon the Nimbin Aquarius Festival 1973 came about, so a strong "Grass Roots" movement was being born at the time. The architects Col James & Bill Lucas were most likely involved with the Autonomous House project, as they were later with the Nimbin Aquarius Festival 1973.³²

A connection can therefore be drawn between the events of the Yellow House, as experienced by young people such as Sutinen, and the manifestation of the counterculture post-Yellow House (i.e.

³¹ Axel Sutinen to the author, 8 December 2015.

³² *Ibid.*

after 1972) in architectural forms such as geodesic domes, the radical artist and design collective known as the Tin Sheds, and the ecologically innovative Autonomous House at the University of Sydney from 1974. The move towards rural communes was also part of this worldwide trend.³³ Broader lifestyle issues were revealed through events such as the Aquarius Festival, which was held in Nimbin during May 1973.³⁴ After Roger Foley closed the doors to the Yellow House in March he also headed north to Nimbin, with video camera in hand, to experience and record some of the new elements of the counterculture then coming into play. Foley not only recorded the construction of alternate housing at the festival site and the presence of geodesic domes, but also an interview with Richard Neville of *OZ* magazine fame. The Yellow House existed as an important Sydney-based point of intersection between the psychedelic / hippie / Summer of Love / Utopian movements of the 1960s which focussed on freedom of individual expression, and the *Whole Earth Catalog* planetary consciousness manifestations of the early 1970s which sought communal and universal solutions. Art

³³ Andrew Rigby, *Communes in Britain*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1974; Margaret Munro-Clark, *Communes in Rural Australia: The movement since 1970*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1986; David Pepper, *Communes and the Green Vision: Counterculture, Lifestyle and the New Age* Green Print, London, 1981.

³⁴ Lee Stickells, 'And Everywhere Those Strange Polygonal Igloos: Framing a History of Australian Counterculture Architecture,' in *Proceedings of the 30th Annual Conference of the Society of Australian Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand*, July 2-3, 2013, 555-568; 'Exiting the Grid: Autonomous House Design in the 1970s,' in *Architecture, Institutions and Change - Proceedings of the Society of Australian Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand*, 32, 2015, 652-662.

and new ways of thinking were played out within and upon the walls of the Yellow House; new ways of living evolved beyond its walls when the owner sought to redevelop the building in 1973 and the doors were closed.

Martin Sharp's Yellow House was created as a reaction to the repressed conservatism of the post-war years in Australia, and the limited, development of the arts within that environment. Taking on board the experiences of Australian travellers to England, Europe and America from the late 1950s through to the end of the following decade, it sought to dismantle the traditional discipline silos and create a true multimedia experience by bringing together disparate artists in a space which could facilitate cooperation and development of community. It became an important transitional marker of transition for the burgeoning countercultural movement within Australia. Its ephemeral nature, with the building's ever-present threat of demolition and eviction, and its main instigators developing a *laissez faire* attitude towards its operation, combined to encourage risk taking and innovation, with little thought for long-term consequence. As such, it was swiftly forgotten by all those who either were not directly involved, or were not fortunate enough to experience what it had to offer.

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