

## Fabrications

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# Report from the AASA Modernism Collaborative

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## Report from the AASA Modernism Collaborative

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Few would dispute the necessity of understanding the history of our geographical context in order to be able to design for it, yet at the Association of Architecture Schools of Australasia (AASA) annual general meeting in 2018, it became apparent that the ability of university programs to deliver a history of the modernist architecture of our region is uneven. Incremental budget cuts over the last decade have led to reductions in curricular offerings often in history/theory. Whilst some programs offer first-rate subjects on the development of modernism in Australia and New Zealand, others lack the resources to do so. To a large degree, architectural practice in Australia and New Zealand has its roots in international movements, which means that balancing such narratives with Indigenous and regional ones is necessary. Time constraints on teaching, however, can pressure academics to focus on the big picture at the expense of the local and regional. Yet, place-based history is essential to good design practice. So much of modern design is a response to local climate, geography, material availability and lifestyles, therefore studying and understanding these factors will produce better prepared and more effective architects.

The Heads of School at the AASA decided to address these challenges by forming a collaborative group of academics from across Australia and New Zealand. The group was tasked with identifying teaching and curricular challenges that face university programs and brainstorming approaches to them. To date, the group consists of Deborah Ascher Barnstone (Sydney), Ann Cleary (Canberra), Julie Collins (Adelaide), Stuart King (Melbourne), Isabel Rousset (Sydney), Marja Sarvimaki (Gold Coast) and Christoph Schnoor (Auckland). The geographic distribution was important because one aim was to create a greater narrative that was rooted in the different locations, to share expertise, and to develop teaching support.

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In our first meetings, we recognised that despite significant challenges of the kind outlined above, a surge in publications and resources attentive to the “bigger picture” in the last decade or so has made the delivery of lessons on Australia and New Zealand’s modern architecture considerably less daunting. Books such as *Long Live the Modern: New Zealand’s New Architecture, 1904–84*, *The Encyclopedia of Australian Architecture*, *Australia: Modern Architectures in History*, and *Australia Modern: Architecture, Landscape & Design 1925–1975*, have become indispensable tools for architecture students to engage with the region.<sup>1</sup> Equally valuable has been the University of Queensland’s *Digital Archive of Queensland Architecture*, which offers a multi-media platform for students to engage in more open-ended critical inquiry into the state’s modernist legacy between archives and disparate narratives.<sup>2</sup>

We agreed that our first task would be to assemble a teaching resource that could collate and expand this pool of knowledge across local, state, and national borders. We reasoned that the process of researching and collecting content for the purpose of teaching would help reveal new ways of interpreting architectural history. The group assembled a suite of primary and secondary materials that would offer substantial support for teachers and students, including: bibliographies of histories that are national, regional and local; lists of significant buildings; lists of significant architects; architect’s biographies; walking tour itineraries; photographs and drawings of projects ([Figure 1](#)); and videos of the work and the architects. The challenge was to determine how to collect this material, house it, and make it easily available to colleagues and students.

The group agreed that a digital platform to support teaching would be an excellent first resource to assemble. After considerable discussion, we decided to work with GIS-based software (bringing into the group James Melsom, GIS expert) to create a digital resource map that would hold information on important modern design projects across Australasia. A map, we reasoned, would combine image-based information with text-based information well and allow us to create a resource that could be searched and studied in many different ways. Categories of information (so far) include dates, names of architects, building types, history of the project, themes, photographs, drawings, and more, so that teachers and students can elect to engage the material in numerous configurations, such as chronologically, geographically, and typologically.

As we began to compile the database, questions about scope and organisation inevitability came to the fore, which are yet unresolved: When does a regionally salient discourse on modernism begin? What established frameworks might we use to guide our themes? Through these discussions we were forced to grapple with our own roles as curators, as well as to recognise the need to incorporate new voices and broader perspectives and

experiences. We continue to work through these questions but hope to make the digital platform publicly available soon. The idea is to open up populating the map to our colleagues in Australia and New Zealand, since no one academic, or even a small group of academics, is across all the projects worthy of documentation.

We plan on collaborating with SAHANZ to enlarge the discussion on architectural history and pedagogical practice in Australasia. To that end, the AASA Modernism Collaborative will be hosting a symposium entitled “This is Modernism,” which will be co-convened by Julie Collins and Christoph Schnoor and hosted by the Architecture Museum in Adelaide in February, 2024.

Not only is collaboration amongst academics across the country important, but collaboration with organisations outside of academia has been recognised by the group as critical to bringing the profession and the wider public into the conversation about architectural history. In the future this may take the form of partnerships to access materials, links or buildings. Galleries, libraries, archives and museums, professional groups like the Australian Institute of Architects, the New Zealand Institute of Architects, Registration Boards, statutory heritage organisations, or special interest organisations such as



**Figure 1.** Savings Bank of South Australia, Bank Street, Adelaide, Caradoc Ashton, Fisher, Woodhead & Beaumont Smith Architects, unknown photographer, 1958, Hall collection S470/1, Architecture Museum, University of South Australia.

DOCOMOMO and the Art Deco and Modernism Society, could all serve to engender conversations across the professional sector and the wider community of building owners and users. Awareness of such connections will give architecture students a familiarity with the wide range of interested parties that they may find themselves dealing with in their future careers working in the built environment professions.

## Notes

1. Julia Gatley (ed.), *Long Live the Modern: New Zealand's New Architecture, 1904–84* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2008); Philip Goad and Julie Willis, *The Encyclopedia of Australian Architecture* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Harry Margalit, *Australia: Modern Architectures in History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2019); Hannah Lewi and Philip Goad, *Australia Modern: Architecture, Landscape & Design 1925–1975* (Melbourne: Thames & Hudson, 2019).
2. See <http://qldarch.net/>

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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