Notes

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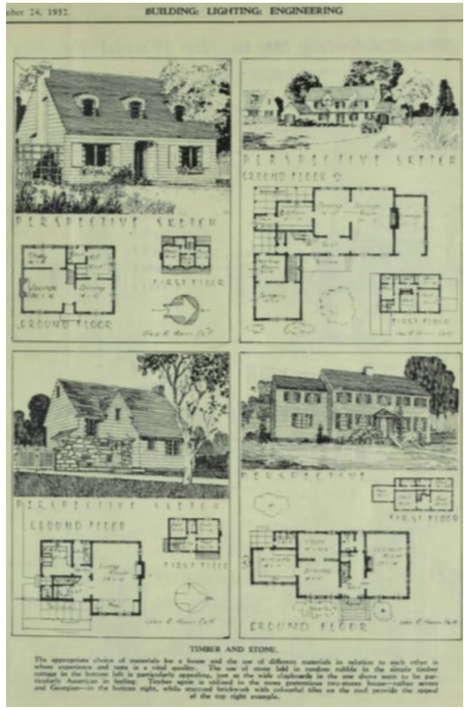

Fig. 1: Typical Australian project from the 1920s. Building, Lighting, Engineering.

Freak Architecture: Australia and Classical Modernism

Abstract

One hundred years ago, Australia was hostile territory for the nascent modern movement -- Australian architects and their clients had notoriously conservative taste and disparaged the new aesthetics emerging in Europe. Yet today, Australia is a bastion of modernism; modern aesthetics are not only the purview of trained architects but also commercial developers. Today, the "in" aesthetic for every building type is modern. Between 1918 and the mid-1920s successful Australian architects like Robert Haddon (1866-1929), Walter Butler (1864-1949), and Harold Desbrowe-Annear (1865-1933) favored a British-inspired Arts and Crafts style, or an Empire style. Australia's first licensed woman architect, Florence Taylor (1879-1969), epitomized Australian sentiment in the 1920s when she denounced what she termed "freak architecture" warning her countrymen against modernism. Yet now, Australian architects like Peter Stutchbury (1954- present); and firms like Denton, Corker, Marshall are world renowned for their elegant neo-modernism while commercial developers of every size construct highly sought after open plan flats and houses in a streamlined, unadorned style clearly influenced by classical modernism. How did this transformation occur? Some scholars credit Walter Burley Griffin (1876-1937) and Harry Seidler (1923-2006) with altering Australian architects' attitudes to modernism while others only address reception until the 1960s. The reasons for the transformation are many: postwar migration of practitioners educated at the most progressive schools abroad; trips and apprenticeships overseas made by Australian architects; changing pedagogy in Australian architecture schools because of the new emigrés but also the new desire to be leading players on the world stage; a postwar construction boom; and a developing sense of independence from British influence.

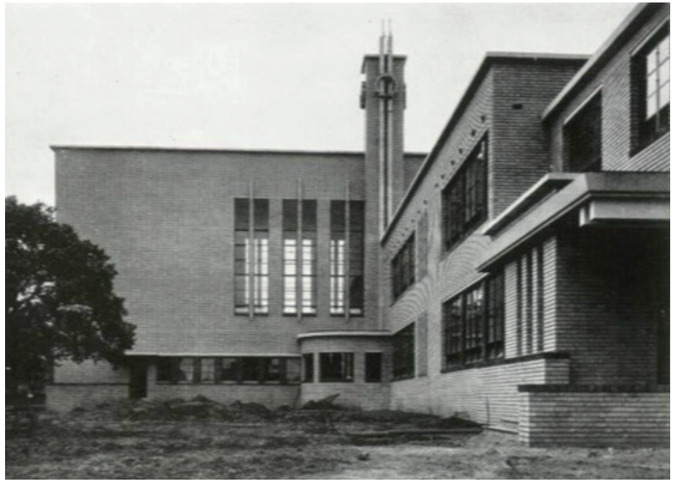

Fig. 2: Norman Seabrook, MacRobertson Girls School in Melbourne, 1935, Dudok's influence.

Introduction

One hundred years ago, at the end of the First World War, Australia was extremely hostile territory for the nascent modern movement -- Australian architects and their clients had notoriously conservative taste and disparaged the new aesthetics emerging in Europe.[1] (Fig. 1) This was true for all building types but particularly so for domestic architecture; it was also true for all parts of the country, rural and urban. Yet today, Australia is a bastion of modernism in its urban centers; modern aesthetics are not only the purview of trained architects but also many commercial developers.[2] The "in" aesthetic for every architect-designed building type has the hallmarks of classical modernism: sleek simple volumes, open spaces, clean lines, inside/outside living, totally free of ornament. Between 1918 and the mid-1920s successful Australian architects like Robert Haddon (1866-1929), Walter Butler (1864-1949), and Harold Desbrowe-Annear (1865-1933) favored a British-inspired Arts and Crafts style, or the Empire style of Edward Lutyens (1869-1944) and Charles Francis Annesley Voysey (1857-1941). Yet now, Australian architects like Peter Stutchbury (1954-present) and Glen Murcutt (1936-present); and firms like Denton, Corker, Marshall and Durbach Bloch are world renowned for their elegant neo-modernism while commercial developers from the best-known giants like LendLease to small local companies and independent contractors construct highly sought after open plan flats and houses in a streamlined, unadorned style clearly influenced by classical modernism.[3] (Fig. 4) How did this transformation occur? Some scholars credit Walter Burley Griffin (1876-1937), Marion Mahony Griffin (1871-1961), and Harry Seidler (1923-2006) with altering Australian architects' attitudes to modernism, which is too simplistic, while others only address reception until the 1960s, which does not consider the full conversion to a modern idiom.[4] The reasons for the transformation are indeed many and include: postwar migration of practitioners educated at the most progressive schools in Europe and the United States; trips and apprenticeships overseas made by Australian architects before and after the Second World War; changing pedagogy in Australian architecture schools; the evolving desire to be leading players on the world stage rather than denizens of a remote outpost; a postwar construction boom that has continued almost unabated; and a developing sense of independence that came with the slow detachment from British influence.

Australian federation only dates to 1901, when the British parliament passed articles permitting the six Australian colonies, to self-govern. Until 1901, the colonies were tethered to Britain politically and culturally. As John Rickard asserts, federation did not abolish the old relationships with Britain, "but merely provided new structures within which they could compete."[5] The sense of racial unity that bound Australians to the UK, and a lingering concept of England as "Home," meant that Australia continued to look to the UK for cultural cues – In what style should its architects design and construct?

The Interwar Period

If disillusion with the First World War experience caused a rejection of traditional artistic approaches in favor of radical experimentation in much of Europe, it elicited a very different response from many Australians who saw the devastating war as proof of Europe's decadence rather than a liberating event.[6] It seemed far more reasonable to build the new suburbs that were springing up around the country in the conservative Federation Style, a combination of

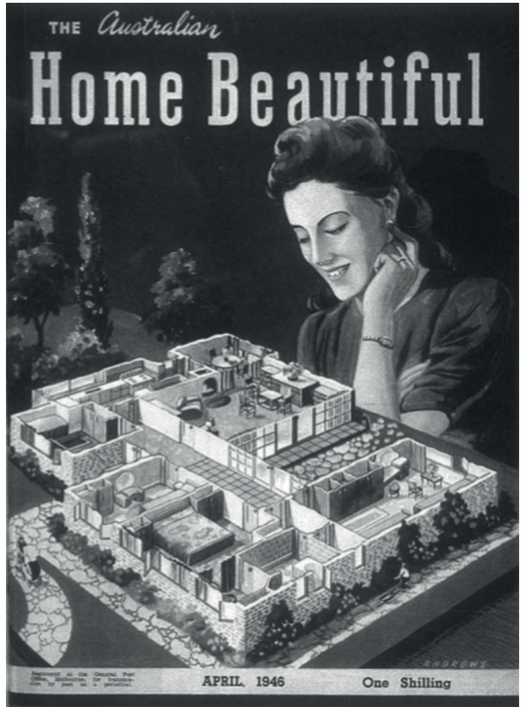

Fig. 3: Page from the Australian Home Beautiful showing a housewife admiring the model for a typical postwar modern home complete with all the latest appliances and contemporary furnishings.

American Bungalow and British Arts and Crafts than in some untested modern European style.[7] Australia's first licensed woman architect, Florence Taylor (1879-1969), epitomized Australian sentiment when she denounced what she termed "freak architecture" in several articles for the Sydney-based Building journal. Taylor was democratic in her dislikes: she disdained equally the American architect Lloyd Wrigh9t (1867-1959), Dutch Michel de Klerk (1884-1923), French August Perret (1874-1954), and Belgian/French Robert Mallet-Stevens (,1886-1945) to name a few pioneers of modernism whom she disparaged. "Like many post-impressionist, cubist and futurist artists," she complained, "they interpret merely what their distorted brains visualize."[8]Taylor used words like "weird," "bizarre," "curious," and "eccentric," to describe the new architecture appearing in Europe and, to a lesser degree, in the United States. Much of Taylor's highly entertaining prose was devoted to warning her countrymen against what she saw as the obvious evils of modernism.[9] And Taylor was not alone – many other critics writing at the time held similar beliefs. Australian cultural conservatism in the 1920s was linked to its distance from Europe and America. Few had seen the latest art and architecture because visiting the sites of innovation was expensive and therefore prohibitive for many so they knew only what was published. Of course, some Australians did travel to see the new art and architecture and attempted to change their countrymen's views upon their return. There were also European and American emigres who brought the latest artistic ideas with them – the architects Walter Burley Griffin and his wife Marion Mahony Griffin were the most successful. Both Griffins had worked for Wright before coming out in 1913 after winning the international competition to design the new capital in Canberra. Even in this period, some critics, like Hardy Wilson (1881-1955) realized that there were better models for Australian architecture than British design. Wilson argued that because of the climatic differences between the UK and Australia it did not make sense to use British design models. He suggested instead Italian and Asian design approaches. He also maintained that in order to develop its own identity, Australian architecture would need a combined response to the continent's climate and landscape that also considered the Australian way of life.[10]

In spite of their successes in Australia between the wars, the Griffins' work had a limited audience. Flipping through issues of the Sydney architecture journal, Building, it is clear that the preferred aesthetic in the interwar housing boom was the Federation bungalow.[11] Advertising images for the "modern home" reinforce the appeals of this reactionary aesthetic. Attitudes were fairly consistent during the 1920s -- the first Australian Exhibition of International Architecture in 1927 ignored the leading figures of European and American avant-garde like Walter Gropius (1883-1969), Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969), and Frank Lloyd Wright.[12]

Australians' first enthusiastic embrace of modernism occurred in two areas during the 1930s: hospital and school design. (Fig. 2) Considering the association of modernism's aesthetics with health and hygiene, this was not surprising. British enthusiasm for the Dutch master of school design Willem Marinus Dudok (1884-1974), who was awarded the RIBA Gold Medal in 1935, might partially explain the enthusiasm for modern aesthetics in school design. Dudok's work was widely published in British architecture journals during the 1920s and 1930s, that were circulated in Australia.[13] In fact, until the 1940s, Australians subscribed to English-language architectural

Fig. 4: Typical contemporary development.

journals only![14] The influence of published design coupled with the knowledge that Australian architects who traveled abroad brought back with them and disseminated in journal articles, public, university, and professionally- sponsored lectures.[15] Australian domestic design enjoyed isolated projects in the modern idiom, of course, like the 1937 Prevost House by Sydney Ancher (1904-1979), but these remained the exceptions.

Slow Changes in Attitude

The immediate postwar period witnessed several cultural changes that affected the reception of modern architecture in Australia: Australia's realignment in foreign policy with the United States during the war; new migrants from Europe who brought their educational and professional experience with them, the gradual dismantling of the White Australia policy that transitioned Australia to a multicultural society, a change in journalistic attitudes towards modern design that spread from the specialized architecture press to the popular press, and Australia's developing sense of national identity and increasing independence from the UK.[16]

Between 1947 and 1969 over 2 million migrants came to Australia adding increasing the population by 30%; then another 2 million migrated between 1970 and 1995; and well over 3 million between 1995 and 2015.[17] The government gradually relaxed immigration controls during the postwar period permitting migrants from all over Europe, not just Great Britain, and eventually all over the world. These continuing migration waves have transformed Australian society into a multicultural one whose composition has had an impact on every aspect of life from coffee and food to architecture.[18]

The influx of European emigres included figures who subsequently became well-known such as the architect Harry Seidler, educated by Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer (1902-1981) at Harvard University; and the artist Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack (1893-1965), schooled at the Dessau Bauhaus where he also taught for a number of years. The ranks of emigres also included less well-known figures like Eva Buhrich (1915-1976) and Hugh Buhrich (1911-2004), former pupils of German architect Hans Poelzig (1869-1936); and Henry Epstein (1909-1968), a graduate of the TU Vienna.[19] Many of these newly arrived practitioners designed for emigre patrons, who shared their aesthetic interests. The work they produced, coupled with their influence on design pedagogy at Australian architecture and design programs, where many took teaching positions, gradually helped affect a shift in Australian aesthetics.[20]

At the same time, Australian architects who were interested in modern design mounted action on several fronts: publications, public lectures, and constructed works. Beginning in the late 1930s, a series of journals appeared touting modernism, like Robin Boyd (1919-1971) and Roy Simpson's (1914-1997) Melbourne student publication Smudges and the Sydney MARS Group's Angle. Articles extolling modern architecture even began to appear in the popular press. "New Ideas in Architecture," reviewing the 1953 Museum of Modern Art exhibition Built in USA Postwar Architecture features Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House, the Eames House, and Richard Neutra's Warren Tremaine House.[21] Unlike the ridicule and disdain that modern domestic designs attracted in the interwar period, these houses are presented as exemplars for contemporary living and, more importantly, for their potential to inform Australian architectural solutions.

Australian Modernism comes into its own

A growing reverence for American modernism was part of the 'new nationalism' of the postwar era.[22] The cultural turn affected all aspects of Australian politics and culture.[23] The American California bungalow had already infiltrated the Australian design psyche in the latter half of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries; some architectural historians believe that California modernism was a more critical influence than European design in the 1940s and 1950s.[24] Given the climatic similarities between parts of California and much of Australia, the argument has merit, at least for some architects.

Australian attention to climate had always been a part of its design ethos but, from the mid-1940s response to climate, geography and landscape, was used to defend modern aesthetics rather than as the basis for formal adjustments to the conservative design.[25] The shift was part of the architectural answer to new nationalism expressed by many architects like Karl Langer and Walter Bunning in the 1940s, Eric Leach in the 1950s, Gabriel Poole (1934-) in the 1960s and 1970s, Glen Murcutt since the 1970s, and Richard Leplastrier (1939-), Lindsay and Kerry Clare ,(1957-) and Troppo today. In this work, acknowledgment of what is uniquely Australian includes the embrace of indoor/outdoor living, that can be exploited in ways not possible in northern climes. The new spatial approach is part of what came to be referred to as "The Australian way of life."[26]

Recognition that there was a unique "Australian way of life" burst into the national consciousness in the postwar period, characterized by "egalitarianism, classlessness, the 'fair go,' stoicism, and mateship."[27] Beginning in the 1950s, the phrase "the Australian way of life" permeated publications on Australia like George Caiger's The Australian Way of Life and George Johnston's "Their way of life" in Ian Bevan's The Sunburnt Country both from 1953. By defining a "way of life" as opposed to "national identity," it was possible to change the terms of reference from character to behavior, habits, local geography and climate, economic opportunity, culture and society. In architectural terms, the "Australian way of life" meant home ownership. Aesthetically, this translated into projects for either beach or bush, yet this did not reflect the realities of 20th-century Australian settlement.[28]

Between 1911 and 2006, Australia went from predominantly rural with almost 60% of the population in rural towns or in the countryside to predominantly urban with 60% in the cities.[29] Today, in 2018, 90% of the population lives in an urban center, making it one of the most urbanized nations in the world.

Australia's urban nature meant that at least to some degree, it was a site of modernity, if not of modern design aesthetics. Certainly, by the 1960s, it had become a site of modern aesthetics as well as architects used the postwar urban construction boom as an opportunity to test new design ideas.[30] As in many Western countries, the postwar period was one of explosive growth (real wealth per capita doubled between 1960 and 1996, then doubled again between 1996 and 2005). Residential suburbs and high-rise building development (mostly commercial) in the cities boomed, where old neighborhoods and urban fabric were torn down and replaced by new construction. Architects were acutely aware of the changing nature of Australia at this time as an issue of Architecture in Australia from 1962 illustrates with articles ranging from the history of Australian population growth to federal immigration policy to design challenges of urban housing.[32]

Articles on design from the 1960s and 1970s typify the postwar attitude: designs are up-to-date examples that could be almost anywhere – with open plans, large surfaces of glass on the facades, and simple volumes and lines. At the same time, Australian architects declared sensitivity to place – to climate, landscape, and lifestyle – and increasingly developed approaches with subtle differences to modern architecture elsewhere. Australian projects receiving international notice tended to be bush and beach houses – that is, ones in a typically Australian landscape. While there are critical reviews of the work, they are critical of particular design decisions but not of the overall aesthetics – a sea change from the 1920s. Historicism is nowhere to be seen.

Although the Labor government of the early 1970s attempted to correct some of the issues caused by rampant postwar development, the reversal from unbridled outward expansion only began in the 1980s with a series of government policy shifts aimed at renewing the middle and inner city that altered the main locus of housing design and construction from the outer suburbs back to the city center.[33] New development pushed prices ever higher making the city centers expensive enclaves for the well-heeled. By this time, architects in public and private practice had long since embraced the basic tenets of modernism, as an issue of Architecture Australia attests, and the well-educated upper middle classes, who were the primary clients for inner city development, shared their inclinations. The fact that this so did not mean that Australian architecture is all the same only that traditional and historically-based design for new construction was out of fashion -- even postmodernism had little effect on this attitude.

How can this transformation be explained? The confluent changes to Australia after the Second World War -- becoming a multicultural society, asserting independence from Britain, developing a sense of national identity, and growing economic prosperity and the construction boom – together with a belief that the postwar period ushered in a new era, were probably not enough to push Australia towards modern aesthetics without a helpful nudge. Robert Crawford suggests that that nudge came from the Australian advertising industry, which pushed modern technology and design more and more aggressively after the war.[34] As Crawford points out, the advertising campaigns of the 40s and 50s coincided with Australians' newfound prosperity and the new culture of consumerism. In this environment, people were encouraged to buy the latest gadgets, including the now affordable automobile, with their elegant streamlined design, in order to fulfill the image of "the Australian way of life."

As Justine Lloyd and Lesley Johnson point out, as part of this same consumer push between 1940 and 1960, Australia marketed the modern home to housewives as one of the new possessions they all needed.[35] Images in contemporary home journals like a typical one from 1946 in The Australian Home Beautiful show women leaning over models of thoroughly modern homes kitted out with contemporary furniture and appliances.[36] (Fig. 3) Modern design was presented as a desirable commodity and a mark of the new postwar Australian society. While the totally modern beach and bush houses were the first unique architectural emblems of this new Australia, it was the image of modernity they projected that was their enduring contribution and that easily transferred to the booming Australian cities where postwar construction of houses and housing created plenty of oppor-

tunities to build in a modern style. (Fig. 4) Over time, modern architecture became the inhabitable correlative to those streamlined new commodities on the Australian market; functional, rational, practical and elegant.

Notes

[1] John F. Williams, The Quarantined Culture: Australian Reactions to Modernism 1913 -1939 (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995); and Donald Leslie Johnson, Australian Architecture: 1901 – 1951 (Sydney: Univ. of Sydney Press, 1980).
[2] Noticeable exceptions are housing developments constructed in the outer suburbs by government agencies and private developers.
[3] Australian real estate websites are excellent sources. See: domain.com.au and realestate.com.au for typical examples.
[4] Johnson, Australian Architecture; Andrew McNamara, Ann Stephen, Philip Goad, Modern Times: The untold Story of Modernism in Australia (Sydney: Miegunyah Press, 2008).
[5] John Rickard, Australia: A Cultural History (Melbourne: Monash University Press, 2017), 106-107.
[6] Rickard, 119.
[7] Peter Cuffley, Houses of the 20s and 30s (Fitzroy: Five Mile Press, 1989).
[8] Taylor, 1925.
[9] Taylor, 1923; and 1925.
[10] Hardy Wilson, "Architecture in Australia," Art in Australia, (Sydney) No. 4, 1923; Hardy Wilson, Domestic Architecture in Australia (1910; Stanislaus Fung and Mark Jackson, "Yellow of the East and White from the West: Hardy Wilson's Grecian and Chinese Architecture (1937)," Architecture Theory Review, 1/1, 63 -68.
[11] Building, September 11, 1920 on designing and constructing affordable homes for soldiers. See pages 63-66.
[12] Brochure & Catalogue of the First International Architectural Exhibition (Sydney: Institute of Architects, NSW, June 1927).
[13] Carole Hardwick, The Dissemination and influence of Willem Marinus Dudok's work in the climate of modernism in architecture in Australia, 1930 – 1955, dissertation at the University of Sydney, 1998.
[14] Johnson, Australian Architecture, 86.
[15] Johnson, Australian Architecture:, 88-94.
[16] "New Ideas in Architecture," Sydney Morning Herald, February 22, 1953, 19.
[17] Parliament of Australia, https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliament ary_Library/pubs/rp/rp1617/Quick_Guides/MigrationStatistics.
[18] Geoffrey Brahm Levey, "Multiculturalism and Australian National Identity," Political Theory and Australian Multiculturalism, ed. Geoffrey Brahm Levey (New York: Berghahn, 2008) 254 - 277.
[19] Rebecca Hawcroft, The Other Moderns: Sydney's Forgotten European Design Legacy (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2017); House: Hugh Burich 1972, exhibition curated by Neil Durbach and Cath Lassen, Garry Anderson Gallery, Sydney, 10 September – 5 October, 1991: Jennifer Tayler, Australian Architecture since 1960 (Melbourne: RAIA, 1980).
[20] For an overview of shifts in Australian design and architecture education after the war, see the forthcoming book Bauhaus Diaspora, eds. Anne Stephen, Philip Goad, and Andrew McNamara (Sydney: Power Institute).
[21] Built in USA: Post-war Architecture, ed. Henry Russell Hitchcock and Arthur Drexler (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1953).
[22] Richard White, Inventing Australia (Sydney: 1981).
[23] Rickard, Australia: A Cultural History; Jack Doig, "New Nationalism and Australia and New Zealand: The Construction of national Identities by Two Labour Governments in the Early 1970s," Australian Journal of Politics and History, 59/4, 18 Dec 2013; Richard White, Inventing Australia (Sydney: 1981).
[24] Op cit, 154-155.
[25] Modernism & Australia, 567.
[26] Richard White, "The Australian Way of Life,' Journal of Historical Studies, 18/73 (1979), 528 – 545.
[27] Sara Cousins, "Contemporary Australia" (Melbourne: National Centre for Australian Studies, 2005), 1.
[28] Desley Luscombe, An Analysis of Narrative Histories of Architecture: A Reading of J. M. Freeland's Architecture in Australia: A History, Master's thesis (Sydney: UNSW, 1988), 6 – 60.
[29] BITRE, The Evolution of Australian Towns (2014), 58.
[30] Taylor, Australian Architecture since 1960, charts the transformations until the late 1980s.
[31] BITRE, The Evolution of Australian Towns (2014), 172.
[32] Architecture in Australia, (Sydney: Royal Australian Institute of Architects) 57/1, January 1962, 1 – 88.
[33] Neil Coffee, Emma Baker, and Jarrod Lange, "Density, sprawl, growth: how Australian cities have grown in the last 30 years," The Conversation, 3 Oct. 2016; https://theconversation.com/density-sprawl-growth-how-australian-cities-have-changed-in-the-last-30-years-65870. Australian cities were called "doughnuts" because of their empty inner precincts
[34] Robert Crawford, "Selling Modernity: Advertising and the Construction of the Culture of Consumption in Australia, 1900 – 1950," Antipodean Modern: ACH 25 (2006) 114- 143, 137.
[35] Justine Lloyd and Lesley Johnson, "Dream stuff: the postwar home and the Australian housewife, 1940-1960" Environment and Planning D: Society and Space, 2004, vol 22, 251.
[36] Op cit, 253.