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Cultural Transfer: A New Way to Understand the Avant-Garde in Australia

Modern architecture outside the supposed centres in Europe and the United States has long been theorised as unoriginal regional copies of imported ideas. Much of the scholarship of Australian modern architecture is no different. Yet, culture has never originated in one part of the world only; it has always been a product of transnational exchange. And ideas brought in from overseas have always been subject to complex processes of acceptance, adaptation, and reinterpretation. This paper looks at several important Australian writings and buildings from the period between 1930 and 1960 to unpack some of the ways that modern aesthetics were developed Down Under as combined responses to foreign ideas and the unique Australian climate, nature, and lifestyle.

Keywords: Australian architecture, Australian modernism, critical regionalism, cultural transfer

Introduction

There is the paradox: how to become modern and to return to sources; how to revive an old, dormant civilization and take part in universal civilization.

Paul Ricoeur,
'Universal Civilization and National Cultures'

Australian architectural modernism has long been considered an exemplar of regional design, dependent on European and American sources and unoriginal in its approach, yet the truth is far more complicated – Australian architects developed a unique set of aesthetic responses to ideas they imported from the European and American avant-gardes based on responses to local landscape, climate, and ways of living. A close examination of architecture in the transitional period from the mid-1930s to 1960 suggests that a process of cultural transfer was at work driving

the adaptation, reinterpretation, and resignification of modernist tropes Down Under.¹ Australian architect Robin Boyd famously declared 1934 to be the year of revolution because of what seemed to be the sudden appearance of modern architecture in Australia between 1933 and 1935.² By 1960, that architecture had developed a distinctive aesthetic. Like many, Boyd tells a heroic tale of ‘prophets’ like American architects Walter Burley and Marion Mahoney Griffin, and Australian architect Leighton Irwin who supposedly had an outsized influence on Australian practice. Other historians have taken a slightly different approach, usually crediting the work of the Griffins together with a group of European émigrés including Eva and Hugh Buhrich, and Harry Seidler, whose practices flourished after the Second World War.³ The Griffins’s work, however, had a very limited audience in the years they were practising and by the time that Seidler began to practice just after the Second World War, there was already an established modern idiom in the country. Furthermore, most of these accounts ignore the importance of study, work, and travel abroad that many Australian practitioners engaged in and, more importantly, do not identify the ways in which avant-garde tropes were altered Down Under but rather discuss the importation of foreign ideas like Functionalism to Australia’s shores.⁴ Thus, there must be more to the story of what aspects of the modernist idiom were accepted, adapted, and reinterpreted for the Australian context.

Generally, modern architecture in Australia is seen as a synthesis of European and American modernist tenets with local geography, climate, and vernacular architecture in a paradigmatic example of critical regionalist design, suggesting second-rate imitation and provincialism, rather than cultural transfer and change, or original design.⁵ Since Terry Smith’s

¹ See Espagne (2013): 1–9; Walker and Burns (2018): 25–46.

² Boyd (1947; repr. 2011).

³ Johnson (1980); Taylor (1990); Gazzard (1968): 11–16; *The Other Moderns: Sydney’s Forgotten European Design Legacy*, ed. Rebecca Hawcroft (2017).

⁴ Contemporary historians are working to correct the record. Notable, for instance, is Julie Willis’s scholarship that includes several essays on the importance of travel abroad to architecture’s development in Australia. See Willis and Williams (2021): 357–397, and Willis (2016): 158–179.

⁵ Art historians writing about Australian art have also grappled with these questions. See,

famous article on provincialism, art historians like Rex Butler and A. D. S. Donaldson, and Ian McLean, have persuasively argued against the concept of provincialism or a one-way flow of ideas in Australian art.⁶ Using American and Australian relations as the case, Butler and Donaldson persuasively demonstrate the historic and ongoing interaction between Australian and American artists as the basis for cultural exchange. McLean discusses the avant-garde outside of Europe, globalism, and the myth of the Other, showing how misconceived provincialist arguments were from the start. All three art historians confine their arguments to fine art, but they apply equally to architecture – although in architectural studies, the concept of *critical regionalism* is the term most often debated. Like provincialism, the very concept of critical regionalism suggests a derivative, rather than original approach. And, as with provincialism, contemporary art historians like Karen Burns, Sandra Kaji-O’Grady, Paul Walker, and Julie Willis have convincingly argued that critical regionalism does not apply to the Australian case.⁷ The contention here is that Australian architects went far beyond imitation to develop original approaches that often were later exported abroad – examples include new models for inside-outside living, combinations of local materials unique to Australia with universally-used ones, site- and climate- responsive design, and a contemporary interpretation of Southeast Asian constructive and spatial ideas.

Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre coined the term *critical regionalism* in 1981 as a way of explaining the many different inflections of the Modern Movement in architecture around the world.⁸ They, and Kenneth Frampton writing soon afterwards, used critical regionalism to illuminate what they saw as the dialectic relationship between imported, modernist aesthetics and values, and local traditions in places outside the centres of Western culture. Critical regionalism therefore

for instance, Smith (1945); Smith (1974): 54–59; and Smith (2017): 6–32. Kenneth Clark too famously addressed provincialism in *Provincialism* (1962).

⁶ Butler and Donaldson (2012): 291–307. Other art historians have made similar arguments like McLean (2009): 625–632.

⁷ Walker and Burns (2018): 25–46; Kaji-O’Grady and Willis (2003): 221–231.

⁸ Tzonis and Lefaivre (1981): 164–178.

mediated between universalising tendencies and new technologies, on the one hand, and local conditions such as vernacular building traditions, geography, climate, and politics, on the other.⁹ Whilst the concept certainly offered invaluable insights into the development of modern idioms outside of Europe and America by suggesting a process of global cultural transfer, there are many aspects of the dynamics of this transfer process that critical regionalism does not address.¹⁰ What Frampton read as a form of architectural resistance, one that refuses to capitulate to globalisation and its equalising forces, can also be read as a mechanism of acceptance, the way in which places like Australia that have been considered culturally marginal engaged with and assimilated theoretical and aesthetic paradigms imported from overseas.

Equally problematic, the idea of critical regionalism furthers the modernist myth of aesthetic purity. In the critical regional model, only designs made in the cultural centre could be truly, fully modern. Anything created elsewhere must be, by definition, only partially modern and therefore impure. Modern architectural aesthetics were always the result of a negotiation between ideas, and modernism was rarely pure anywhere – there were only ever a tiny contingent of purist practitioners, a truth that was ignored by scholars until recently.¹¹ Most architects accepted aspects of the new idiom without fully embracing everything, so that they might combine open plan and traditional differentiated spaces, new construction techniques with traditional cladding materials, and so on.

In addition, the critical regionalism thesis perpetuates an outdated model of cultural transfer from the supposed centre of civilisation in Europe and America to the supposed periphery in places like Africa, Asia, Australia, and South America, implying a one-directional flow of ideas rather than an exchange. While cultural capital certainly flowed from

⁹ Frampton (1983); Frampton (1987): 20–27.

¹⁰ Keith Eggener outlines one set of critiques of critical regionalism in Eggener (2002): 228–237. Eggener points out how few architects accept the label and its rootedness in colonialist thinking about centre and periphery.

¹¹ See Colquhoun (2007); Ascher Barnstone (2016).

Europe and America elsewhere, it is also true that the reverse occurred. Consider one of the best-known art historical examples – how the European avant-garde used traditional African masks and fetish objects as inspiration for art in the 1910s and 1920s. Applied to architectural design, buildings should be understood as the expression of a dynamic global system of cultural transfer.

Lastly, the critical regionalism concept assumes, as Karen Burns and Paul Walker have argued, that architecture necessarily has an identifiable national identity.¹² Burns and Walker use the story of two Australian pavilions at the Venice Biennale to illustrate how provincial concerns paradoxically resulted in a global aesthetic. Their argument also underscores the fact that if cultural exchange truly operates globally, then national aesthetic identities cannot exist.

Within this exchange system, not only do local, national, and international forces act simultaneously, but they also act differently on individual architects and communities of architects as well as clients and communities of clients. Every piece of architecture is therefore the result of complex negotiations, selection, mediation, and translation, making it difficult to generalise but possible to point to trends in work. Three factors were particularly influential on Australian modern design: climate, landscape, and the local way of life. This essay will explore modernist responses developed in Europe, America, and Australia between 1935 and 1960 to reveal subtle similarities and differences in aesthetic approaches that evidence exchange of ideas.

Climate responsive design and the outside room

Design for better inside-outside relationships and connections to nature, light, and air emerged in Europe in the latter half of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century as a way of improving health and hygiene in buildings. These modernist concerns permeated European design after the First World War as the direct result of a growing

¹² Walker and Burns (2018): 25–46.

understanding of the effects that poor living conditions, such as squalid buildings without proper sanitary facilities, or access to natural light and air, have on people's health and quality of life. By 1918, concerns for improved residential housing provision dovetailed with better medical research on the underlying causes and potential treatments for diseases like tuberculosis, as well as the widespread desire to counter wartime devastation by building better environments. Architects like Bruno Taut and Walter Gropius in Germany, Jan Duiker and J. J. P. Oud in the Netherlands, Le Corbusier in France, and Pearse and Williamson, and Owen Williams in the United Kingdom, all strove to offer direct connections to outside space from all residential units, include ample greenspace in developments, and provide larger windows to allow for more natural light on the interior. Typical aesthetic solutions included balconies and roof gardens with generous greenspace between housing blocks; more glazing than in traditional housing stock, often in ribbon windows or large glazed surfaces; white stucco; elimination of dust-collecting details like baseboard and crown moulding; and use of easy-to-clean materials like stainless steel. Flat roofs atop simple orthogonal volumes dominated the new architecture. As Paul Overy demonstrates in *Light, Air and Openness*, language around health and hygiene may have varied, but the goals were similar around the world.¹³

The discourse in Australia mirrored the European example, with articles on healthy kitchen and bathroom design, and the need for access to clean air and water and proper sewage systems as requirements for good contemporary building.¹⁴ Also, as abroad, Australian discussions were tied to ambitions for efficient and economical design. In some ways, however, Australian concerns do diverge from international ones. In Australia, there was initially considerable resistance to the new aesthetics associated with health and hygiene in Europe, as numerous articles by Florence Taylor in Sydney-based *Building* magazine, and others in

¹³ Overy (2007).

¹⁴ See Osborne (1924): 54; Ashton (1936): 94–98; Wickenden, (1922): 74–75; Collins, (2021), and Julie Willis's many essays and books on hospital design in Australia.

the 1920s and 1930s attest.¹⁵ But the discourse did dovetail with other Australian concerns: interest in designing for local climate and landscape often referred to as ‘harmonising with the surroundings’, recognition that Australian light was extraordinary and should be capitalised on in local building design, and growing interest in how to exploit the climate for indoor-outdoor living.

Australians had begun to adapt architectural ideas to the local landscape and climate almost from settlement in the 19th century. Design elements included steeply pitched roofs to help extract hot air from the inside spaces to keep the interior as cool as possible and room-sized, well-protected verandas on their buildings, often on every side, to offer outdoor living and sleeping and to protect outside walls from tropical rains and direct sun exposure.¹⁶ By the late 19th century, there was a growing recognition that the Australian landscape and climate were extraordinary assets to be celebrated, not avoided or negated, values promoted by the first Australian plein-air painters, the Melbourne-based Heidelberg School. Their focus on depicting the Australian way of life, unique nature, and intense sunlight, influenced architects who increasingly adapted these ideas to the building context, particularly to single-family home design.¹⁷

Several architects who practiced at the beginning of the 20th century contributed to changing attitudes towards architectural design in Australia: Robert Haddon (1866–1929), William Hardy Wilson (1881–1955), and Leslie Wilkinson (1882–1973) were three of the most influential. They represent two different generations: Haddon was born in the middle of the 19th century and Hardy Wilson and Wilkinson were born twenty years later in the 1880s. These three architects agreed

¹⁵ Taylor famously led the charge against modernism; one of her most notorious articles was Taylor (1925): 68–76. See also, McConnell (12 April 1928): 33–40; Symons (12 Oct. 1925): 68; Fitzpatrick (12 March 1926): 112–119.

¹⁶ Freeland (1968): 50–84.

¹⁷ The influence Heidelberg artists had was both direct and indirect: William Hardy Wilson, for instance, not only admired the painters but was also close to Arthur Streeton, one of the most distinguished artists in the group.

on the importance of climate and site to design, about which they wrote extensively. Hardy Wilson was convinced that reflection on Australian ways of life, in addition to its climate and landscape, would be a productive way of developing an appropriate design aesthetic for Australia. In truth, the combination of both approaches contributed to the rise of a local aesthetic approach.

Robert Haddon formed strong ideas about building programmes and organisation as the aspects of architecture in which Australians could best respond to their climate. He promoted the inclusion of a sunroom, a space that had optimal natural light, in every house. In his essay on sunroom design, Haddon pointed out, ‘Australia is distinctly an “open air country”’, meaning that its mild seasons give it the unique opportunity for comfortable inside-outside living almost year-round.¹⁸ This led him to advocate for the four-sided house, which he thought was ideal because it lets in light and air from every side, thereby capitalising on one of Australia’s natural assets, sunlight. Haddon also championed the sunroom as an essential element in Australian house design for its health and psychological benefits and, like many Australian architects of the period, he experimented with the enclosed courtyard as an integral part of the house. Haddon eventually developed a design system that responded to the sun’s differing paths and heights during the seasons. The sunroom and what architects began to term ‘outdoor living rooms’ became common features in Australian design.

In contrast, William Hardy Wilson focused on the stylistic inspirations for Australian design. He decided that there were better models for Australian architecture than conservative British and American design, on which so much Australian work had depended since settlement in 1788.¹⁹ Instead, Wilson envisioned an architecture that responded to Australia’s location in the East. Wilson was one of the first to argue that it was because of the climatic and geographic differences between the UK and Australia that it did not make sense to use British

¹⁸ Haddon (1928): 24.

¹⁹ Van der Plaats (2013): 22–33; Van der Plaats (2018): 67–87; Wilson (1929).

design models for Australian architecture. (As Deborah van der Plaats demonstrates, he even went so far as to credit climate as the single most important determinant in human agency of every kind.)²⁰ Wilson went further than most critics writing at the time to posit that climate, more than any other factor, determined architectural style. 'But man has never achieved superiority over climate and is still in the position that he occupied in his first civilised days. The effects of an irresistible force of nature cannot be altered by man's ingenuity. He always was, and always must be, subservient to its power.'²¹ Because Great Britain's climate is generally cold and wet it can never serve as a design model for hot, dry Australia, he reasoned. Wilson also believed that climate affects the national psyche, which in turn affects the way people live. He saw Britain as insular and inward-looking, qualities he saw mirrored in the contained and protective British architectural design that is completely separated from, even hostile to, the landscape. He blamed Australia's poor design on the numbers of British émigrés who brought their design approach to the Antipodes. By contrast, he found Australia's tropical climate invigorating and stimulating for creative ideas. In place of British models, Wilson proposed Chinese design methodologies since, he reasoned, these developed in a country with a climate similar to that of Australia. Lastly, he maintained that in order to develop its own distinct identity, Australian architecture would need a response to the continent's climate and landscape that also considered the Australian way of life.²² In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, Australian writers would become fascinated with the question: what is the Australian way of life that, in turn, affected many aspects of cultural production including architectural design.²³

Wilson is best known for his 1929 novel, *The Dawn of a New Civilisation*, in which he decries the lack of imagination in Australian architecture and its imitative character. Wilson identified the heat and

²⁰ Van der Plaats (2018): 67–87.

²¹ Wilson (1929): 224.

²² Wilson (1923); Wilson (1919); Fung and Jackson (1937): 63–68.

²³ Rickard (2017).

humidity in Sydney's inner city as destructive characteristics of Australia's climate, that could act negatively on its architects to make them sluggish and slow of mind.²⁴ At the same time, Wilson offers a glimmer of hope: the novel's main protagonist, Richard Le Measurier, manages to design an imaginative new house when he works on a block of land in the country where the climate is temperate and pleasant. The design is responsive to local conditions including the flora and climate, and therefore succeeds. The book's message is clear: designs that respond to the place in which they are situated will succeed, whereas designs that ignore local conditions will not.

Leslie Wilkinson approached the question of design in Australia slightly differently. He wrote extensively on what he perceived to be the failings of earlier design work in Australia: 'The principal shortcoming in the past seems to have been the failure to appreciate the importance of the setting of the building in its surroundings: the failure to appreciate the value of light as the source of all beauty, and the failure to appreciate the importance of mass forms and colour, and the subordinating of detail to its proper role in the full orchestra.'²⁵ Other aspects of design that Wilkinson called out included protection from pests, sun, and wind, and providing spaces for sleeping out and living outside. 'Architecture and nature are two beautiful things, but together they make an even more beautiful thing', he wrote, emphasising the importance of deliberate, effective interaction between inside and outside space for Australian houses.²⁶ Wilkinson wrote a great deal about 'climate, site, materials, cost and function' – five design considerations that he repeatedly referred to as central to any project. He advocated the inclusion of a courtyard in plans and the preservation of any trees existing on the site.²⁷ Anticipating aesthetic solutions beyond copying another style, he wrote that the architect's 'province is to shape, to give form.'²⁸

²⁴ Van der Plaats (2013): 22–33.

²⁵ Wilkinson (1924): 11.

²⁶ Wilkinson (1928): 77.

²⁷ Wilkinson (1927): 19.

²⁸ Wilkinson (1936): 46.



1. Florence Taylor's article on European modernism, 'Freak Architecture', *Building*: the magazine for the architect, builder, property owner and merchant, 37/218 (October 12, 1925)

Although they wrote in favor of a better response to Australia's climate, Hardy Wilson and Haddon did not specify an aesthetic solution to climate- and site-sensitive design, but Wilkinson did. Wilkinson thought that adopting styles from other warm-weather locations might provide the solution to the Australian aesthetic question. He suggested

looking to Spain, Southern Italy, Provence, France, and Northern Africa for more appropriate models than England, the country most looked to by Australian practitioners when Wilkinson was writing. He advocated the adaptation of historic Mediterranean tropes after a close study of that architecture, reasoning that since they were designed for a climate that is similar to Australia's, they would work well in Australia's conditions. Wilkinson's residential projects of the 1920s and 1930s therefore used Mediterranean features like white, pink, and peach rendered facades, arched windows, covered arcades, covered balconies, garden pergolas, and extensive outdoor living areas adjacent to the house. Wilkinson was not able to imagine an aesthetic without historic references, however, in spite of illusions in his writing suggesting that architects should go beyond imitation.

Concern for climate soon developed into a consensus of the importance of synergy with the surrounding natural landscape and this, in turn, led to the desire to celebrate the uniqueness of Australian nature.²⁹ Much more than access to natural light and air, this meant choosing bush and beach sites, situating the building to capitalise on views, preserving existing native flora, creating spatial continuity between inside and outside spaces, and forming exterior spaces that were more than seasonal embellishments of the building but actual living spaces integral to the building's programme and part of the landscape design. It remained for the next, slightly younger, generation of Australian architects to combine modern aesthetics with these older ideas.

Australian adaptations

As in England, Australians were slow to embrace the new aesthetics appearing in Europe, but by the mid-1930s this changed. Australian architects who had been abroad to study, work, or see contemporary architecture in other countries led the way by experimenting with ways

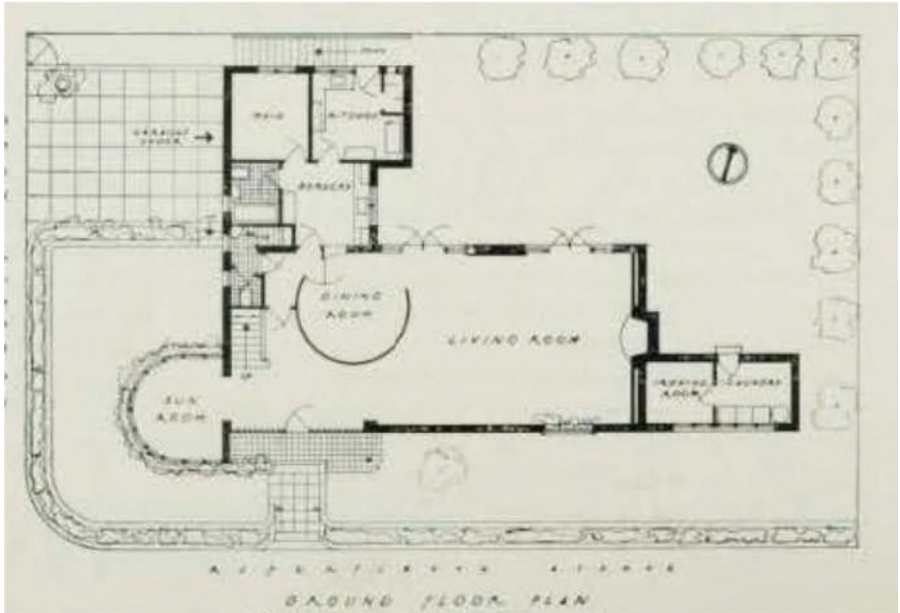
²⁹ Barnes (1923): 48.



2. Previst House, Bellevue Hill, New South Wales (1937), *Decoration and Glass*, 3/8 (December 1, 1937)

to combine site- and climate-responsive solutions with the new materials and modern aesthetics they had seen overseas.

Certain design approaches and elements came to characterise the work of young practitioners like Sydney Ancher, Arthur Baldwinson, and Roy Grounds, including design for bush sites with minimal disturbance to the local flora; embrace of the one-story house, which made indoor-outdoor living easier to achieve; floor-to-ceiling windows and glass doors opening onto verandas, balconies, and courtyards as a way of creating the seamless inside to outside connections; and incorporation of courtyards



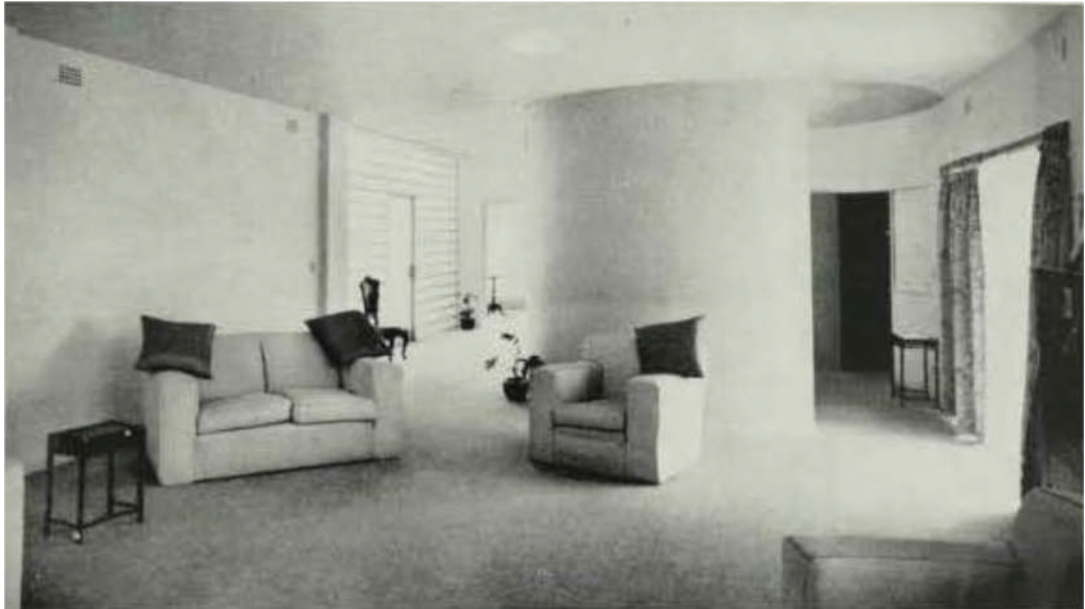
3. Ground floor plan of the Prevost House, *Decoration and Glass*, 3/8 (December 1, 1937)

and verandas as extensions of the building interior to become intentional outdoor living spaces where the local climate, landscape, and light could be enjoyed.³⁰ Labelling such spaces the ‘living room,’ rather than ‘courtyard,’ is evidence of the architects’ thinking. That is, they conceived outdoor spaces as rooms, as extensions of the interior rather than as separate from it.

Very early on in his career, Sydney Ancher rejected the approach that Wilkinson had supported when he bemoaned the tendency to focus on the architecture of the past, rather than the innovations of the present, sentiments that others like Walter Bunning would echo.³¹ Although

³⁰ Haddon (1928): 24.

³¹ Bunning (1942). In the article, Bunning ridicules the tendency to build faux historic architecture and explains why it is foolish by comparing it to assembling an automobile with parts from ten, fifteen, and twenty years before.



4. Photograph of the living room in the Prevost House, *Decoration and Glass*, 3/8 (December 1, 1937)

speaking of architectural education when he rejected foreign vernacular models as the basis for contemporary Australian design, it is clear from Ancher's work that he applied this same principle to his own designs.³² He also believed that study of modern art was critical to architects' ability to design for the present. In other words, Ancher thought that contemporary art concepts were important to modern architectural practice.

The Prevost House, completed in 1937 by Ancher with Reginald Prevost, has many of the hallmarks of the European avant-garde: white stucco exterior, flat roofs, a glass-block wall at the entry flanked by a thin steel column, tubular steel handrails, large steel-frame floor-to-ceiling ribbon and porthole windows, and open spatial planning (Fig. 2). Thus,

³² 'Travelling Scholar Returns: Sydney Ancher's views on architectural education' (1936): 76; Ancher (1939): 244–250.

it looks very like many of the avant-garde projects being built in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. At the same time, the house utilises Australian approaches to the site: it sits close to the edge of the site to allow maximum area for greenspace behind the house; the architects placed a sunroom on the southwest side of the ground floor, and a series of outdoor spaces around the house to facilitate inside-outside connections (Fig. 3). These include the large, private garden off the living/dining room, a courtyard adjacent to the kitchen, a sunroom at the front of the house, a balcony, and roof decks off all the bedrooms and the nursery (Fig. 4). The garden is on the north side of the house, where it will receive less harsh sunlight, although the roof decks are uncovered, which seems odd considering the strength of the Australian sun. The extensive landscaping that took place when it was constructed is evident in contemporary photographs that show the house buried in green.

The house for Roger Ingpen at Geelong, designed by Roy Grounds and Geoffrey Mewton (now destroyed), also from 1937, looks very much like European projects of its time but with some subtle departures (Fig. 5). Like the Prevost House, it engaged the site but in this instance with a modified pin-wheel plan that allowed for a series of outdoor spaces to interlace with room volumes.³³ The outdoor spaces were almost equal in floor area to each level of the building footprint – evidencing the importance accorded to outdoor living. A sunroom flanked by outdoor roof terraces featured on the west side of the second floor. Perspective sketches show a flat-roofed composition of cream brick construction with large steel-frame windows and steel handrails throughout.

The project therefore updated the traditional local material, brick, by changing its colour. The building masses stepped up and down, similar to some Adolf Loos projects like the Müller House in Prague, and juxtaposed the hard angles of the box with a gentle curve on the ground floor of the west side, where it enclosed the open plan living space.

³³ 'House at Geelong' (23 August 1937): 46.



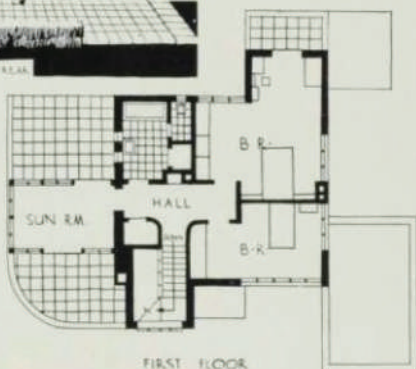
VIEW FROM GARDEN AT REAR

HOUSE AT GEELONG, VICTORIA

For Roger Ingpen, Esq.

Architects: Roy Grounds and G. H. Mewton
(in association)

Builder: W. A. Searle

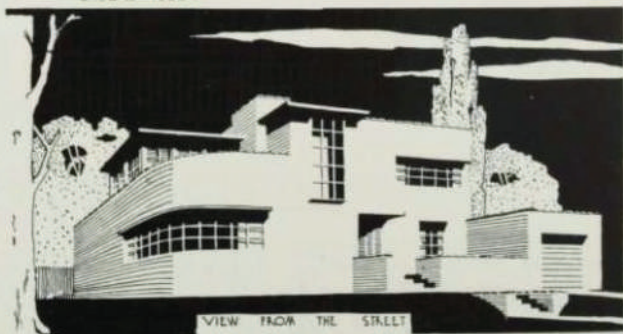


FIRST FLOOR



GROUND FLOOR

Built on the outskirts of Geelong, this house is faced with cream bricks with raked out white joints, with steel windows and iron balustradings painted white, and the entrance door in yellow and white stripes, it strikes a refreshing note of colour compared with the more usual drab surroundings.



VIEW FROM THE STREET



6. Talmage Craig House (1938) showing the integration of local materials with aspects of the modernist idiom. Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW and Courtesy copyright holder, PXD 356/ff. 1294

Arthur Baldwinson's House for Talmage Craig from 1938 was not realised, but it typifies his interwar work (Fig. 6). The sketch shows how Australian architects adapted the new aesthetics to local materials. The Craig House combines the steel frame and white stucco of the European avant-garde with locally available sandstone. A flat-roofed orthogonal block penetrated by horizontal windows intersects a glass-enclosed, round volume that sits atop a sandstone retaining wall capped by plants. The floor-to-ceiling glass wall provides direct connection to the adjacent terrace and lawn. The sketch suggests a house that responds to its sloping site with contiguous outdoor spaces, including terraces and roof deck, and windows strategically located to capitalise on views. A gum tree strategically placed at the entry gate signals the importance of native flora and landscape to the design.

The Ancher/Prevost, Grounds/Mewton, and Baldwinson projects all used clearly recognisable aesthetic tropes from European modern architecture. Adjustments to the aesthetic were subtle, but recognisable, and include the scale and ratio of outdoor spaces to indoor ones, new spaces like the sunroom and outside living room, site sensitive orientation, use of local materials, and the integration of local flora into the building design.

After the Second World War

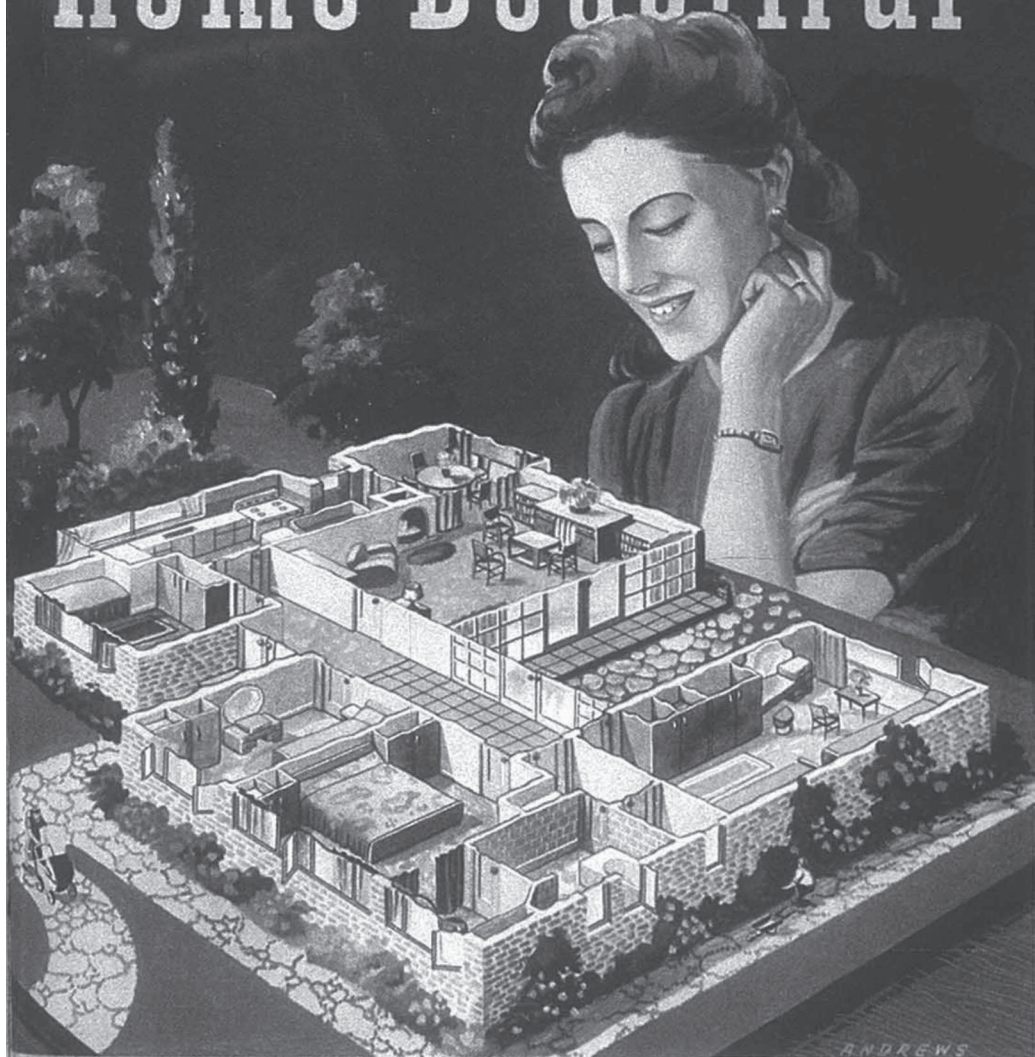
Deviations from European solutions and new aesthetic approaches to common problems are easier to recognise in work done after the Second World War, when Australia experienced a tremendous building boom that gave architects the opportunity to build a great deal and to try new ideas in a period when modern aesthetics became popular (Fig. 7 and 8). Demand was fuelled by returning soldiers, new migrants, and a local baby boom. The popular acceptance of a modern aesthetic, together with certain Australian inflections, is apparent in designs for large-scale, inexpensive housing estates like the project homes schemes and designs promoted in magazines of every kind, as well as in boutique designs for well-heeled clients.³⁴

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 act as the basis for formal adjustments to conservative design.³⁵ The shift was part of the architectural answer to new nationalist feelings expressed by many architects like Karl Langer and Walter Bunning in the 1940s, Eric Leach in the 1950s, Gabriel Poole (b. 1934) in the 1960s and 1970s, Glenn Murcutt and Richard Leplastrier (b. 1939) since the 1970s, and architects like Lindsay and Kerry Clare (b. 1957) and Troppo today. In this work, acknowledgment of what is uniquely Australian includes the

³⁴ For more on the post-war boom see O'Callaghan and Pickett (2012).

³⁵ *Modernism & Australia* (2006): 567.

THE *Australian*
Home Beautiful

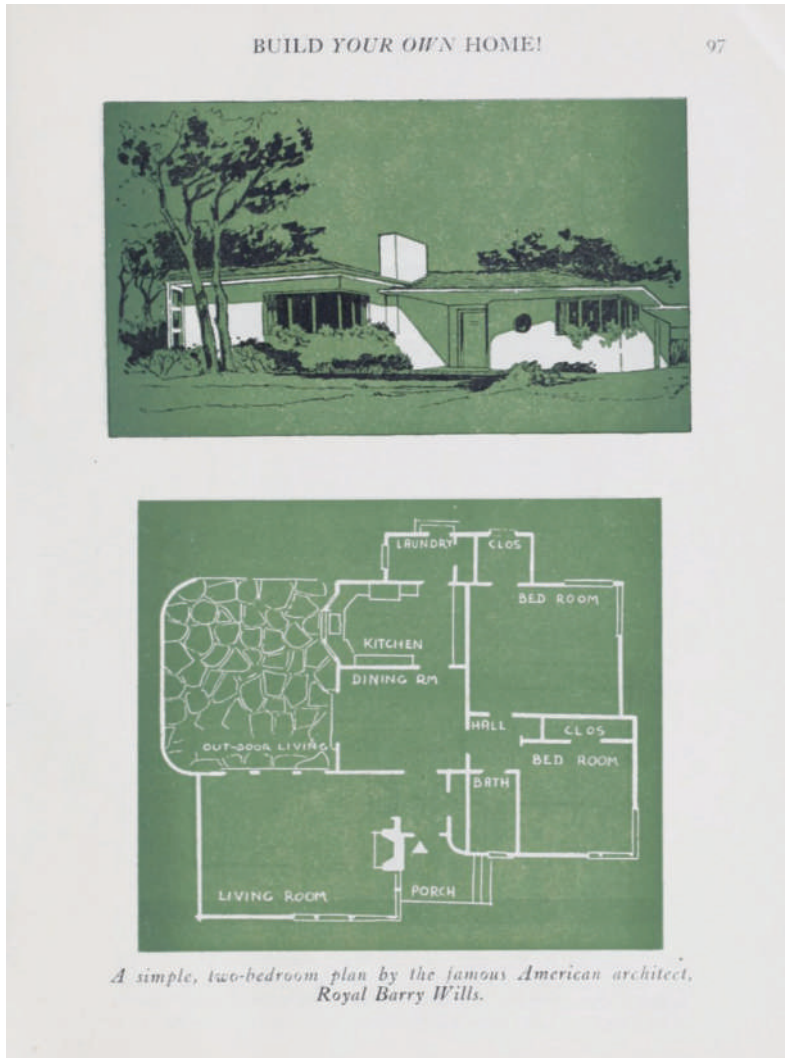


ANDREWS

Registered At the General Post Office, Melbourne, for transmission by post as a periodical.

APRIL, 1946

One Shilling

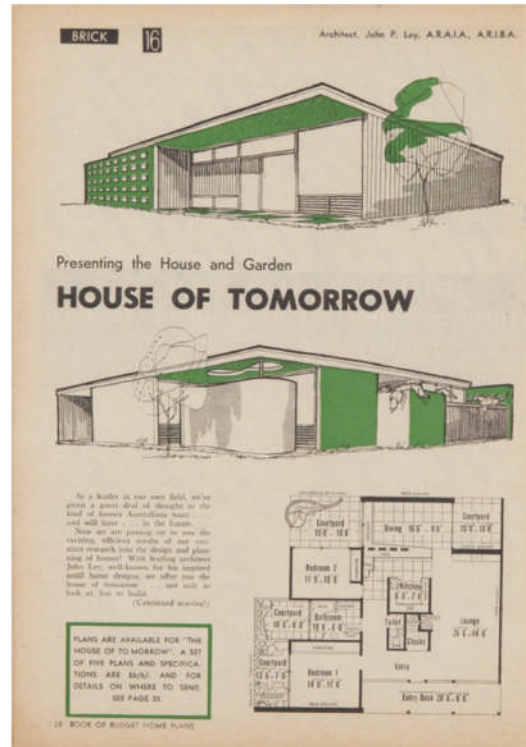


8. A post-war modern design that features an 'outdoor living room', *The Australian Home Beautiful* (date unknown)

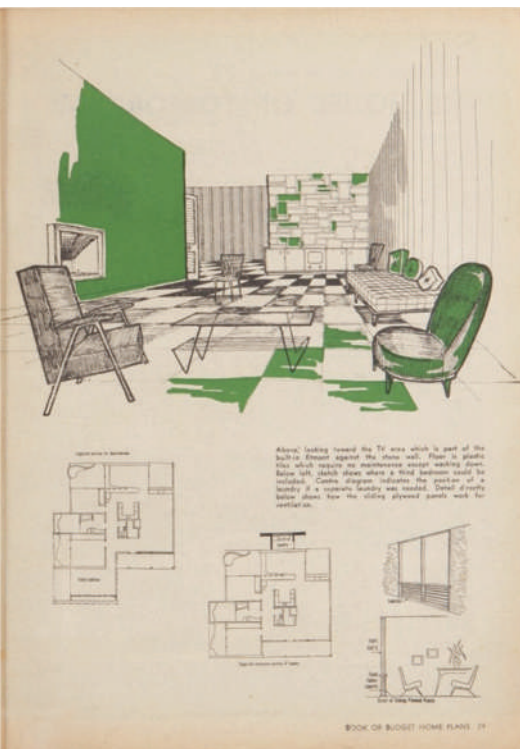
← 7. Cover of *The Australian Home Beautiful* from April 1946 showing a housewife admiring a modern house – the new ideal

embrace of indoor/outdoor living, that can be exploited in ways not possible in northern climes, often to the extreme. In an article from 1941, Geoffrey Mewton expresses the attitude towards spatial planning; good design must respond to climate, location, and contemporary ways of living.³⁶ At the end, Mewton places two floor plans side-by-side to illustrate the difference between old and new concepts for design. The old is a compact house that is internally focused. In contrast, the new has direct outdoor connections for every room. Houses from the 19540s and 1950s like Russell Jack, John Allen, and Pamela Jack's Jack House (1957) and Bill Lucas and Ruth Harvey's

House (1958) further developed the relationship to site by treating it as something precious to be preserved. Their projects touch the land lightly as they literally hover over the bush, ground, streams and rocks, and in the tree canopy, while separations between interior and exterior are further minimised. Designs like these embrace indoor-outdoor living with floor-to-ceiling glass walls and sliding glass doors arranged around courtyard spaces, or enclosed yards that allow the seamless extension of interior space to the outside. While similar to projects in other warm weather environments like California, the Australian work is innovative in the degree to which indoor-outdoor living is emphasised and the scale



³⁶ Mewton (1943): 9–12.



9. The 'House of Tomorrow' is sleek and modern, incorporating generous outdoor living areas adjacent to, and interwoven with, every interior space, *The Australian Home Beautiful* (date unknown)

of resulting spaces. Advertisements for the approach proclaim, 'Enjoy our climate at home'.³⁷ The new spatial approach is part of what came to be referred to as 'The Australian way of life'.³⁸

Recognition that there was a unique 'Australian way of life' burst into the national consciousness in the post-war period, characterised by 'egalitarianism, classlessness, the "fair go", stoicism, and mateship'.³⁹ 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 behaviour, habits, local geography and climate, economic opportunity, culture and society. In architectural terms, the 'Australian way of life' meant home ownership but also houses in the native bush that celebrated local nature and houses designed to facilitate living in the Australian climate. Aesthetically, this often translated into projects for either beach or bush even though such projects did not reflect the realities of 20th century Australian settlement, which was increasingly

³⁷ Sherrard (1950): 29.

³⁸ White (1979): 528–545.

³⁹ Cousins (2005): 1.



10. The Jack House from the entry looking to the brick wall and entry courtyard.

The house's transparency to the surrounding bush is apparent, Caroline Simpson Library, Museums of History NSW Collections, Brenton McGeachie



11. The Jack House living room. The transparency to the exterior is evident, Caroline Simpson Library, Museums of History NSW Collections, Brenton McGeachie

urban.⁴⁰ The aesthetic devices developed for beach and bush living were then also used for city designs.

Marketing campaigns changed dramatically after the war: modern design was promoted as the perfect match for contemporary lifestyles (Fig. 9). Lay magazines like *The Australian Home Beautiful* started to feature modern designs as the desirable aesthetic for the contemporary housewife and her family.⁴¹

In addition to European influences, traditional Southeast Asian tropes permeate much of the work in this period, like houses by Russell Jack and Bill Lucas that use exposed, dark wooden structures, wooden screens, sliding glass doors, open-flexible space, and regular units of measure similar to the Japanese ken but adjusted to the size of Australians (Fig. 10). While some of these projects recall modernist experiments of the 1920s, like Rudolph Schindler's Schindler Chace House, they are more explicit in what they borrowed than overseas projects and more

⁴⁰ Luscombe (1988): 6–60.

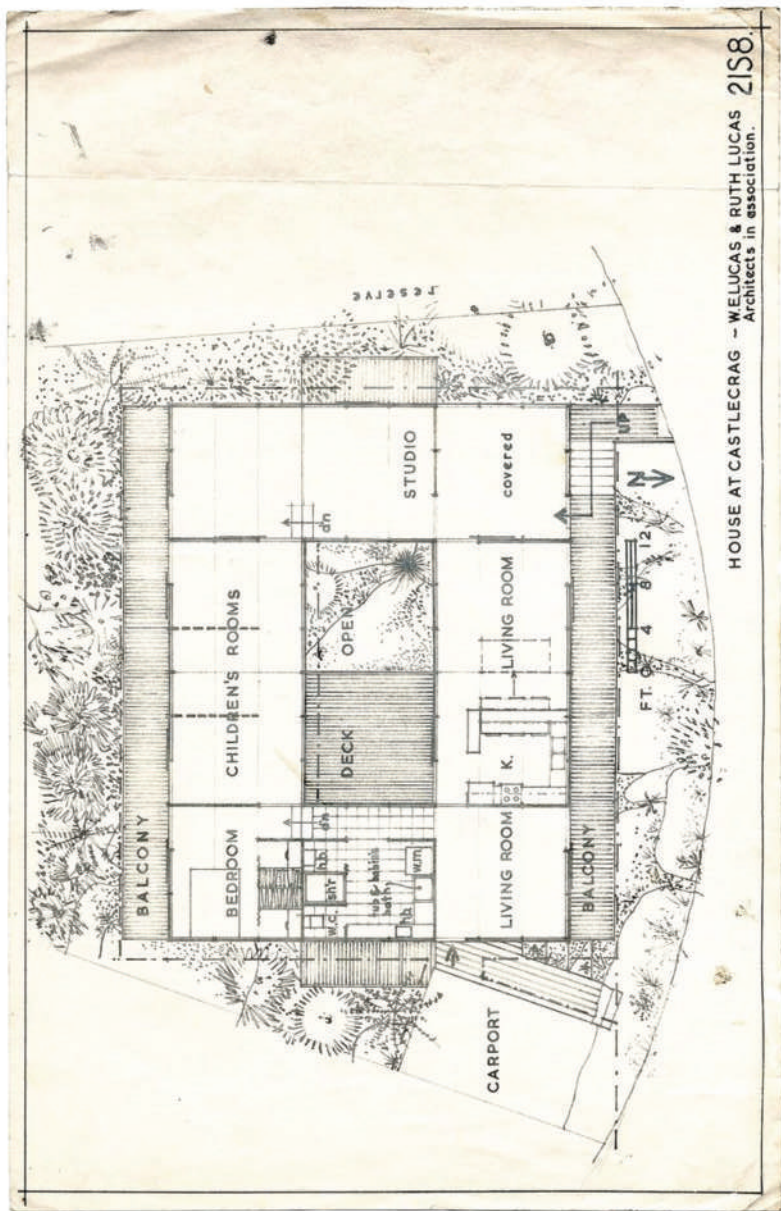
⁴¹ For instance, Sherrard (1950): 29.



12. The Lucas House entry elevation. The approach is through the bush along a suspended wooden walkway that has no handrails to emphasise its openness, Caroline Simpson Library, Museums of History NSW Collections, Ray Joyce

daring in their departures from Asian design. Australian architects had far more intimate knowledge of Asian models than European and American practitioners. Australian architects used minimal structure and simple detailing, an approach that renders the architecture a backdrop for the space and natural environment. Both the Russell Jack House and the Lucas House make this apparent.

Building houses in the bush became very popular – a sign of increased pride in the uniqueness of Australia – and architects responded by dissolving the outer walls to create maximum transparency to the natural context. The Jack House was built on a bush site in Wahroonga north of downtown Sydney. The house perches lightly atop the bushland site between native trees on sandstone outcrops and over a stream, so that it barely disturbs the existing landscape. Like many houses that came afterwards, the Jack House is oriented away from the road towards the bush. The house is not visible from the parking or road and is approached by walking through an archway in a brick wall. Its street side features an opaque brick wall with clerestory windows above head height, while the other side of the house is mostly made of floor-to-ceiling glass windows that open onto a wooden deck (Fig. 11). The plan reinforces its relationship to the bush; it is a slightly cranked bar building sited to capitalise on



HOUSE AT CASTLECRAG - WEL LUCAS & RUTH LUCAS
Architects in association. 2158.

14: The Lucas House plan, Caroline Simpson Library, Museums of History NSW Collections, Ray Joyce



13. Interior of the Lucas House. Its phenomenal transparency in every direction is visible, as is the illusion of nature being inside the house, Caroline Simpson Library, Museums of History NSW Collections, Ray Joyce



15. The Lucas House central deck and kitchen, Caroline Simpson Library, Museums of History NSW Collections, Ray Joyce

the views and fit between the trees. In houses such as this, the indoor-outdoor living idea has expanded so that the interior feels connected to the exterior in a seamless manner. The transparent walls give the illusion of being outside when inside while the large decks invite the occupants to live outdoors. The building's structure is dark stained wood arranged in a repetitive geometry that recalls traditional Japanese buildings but with the proportions and details of a modern house – exposed beams on the inside terminate in double vertical members on the outside. Pergolas and screens reminiscent of Japanese wooden lattice protect parts of the deck from sun and the master bedroom from views.

In 1957, Ruth and Bill Lucas designed a house that is even more extreme in its transparent treatment than the Jack House (Fig. 12 and 13). Set on a steeply sloping site in North Sydney suburb, Castlecrag, the house is also an essay in minimal design. It is elevated off the ground on four slender steel columns that are so few and so light that they seem inadequate to support the loads. This reinforces the illusion of a house

floating in the tree canopy. In plan, the house is ten squares arranged around a central courtyard that is two squares wide – one is a wooden deck, the other a void open to the ground below through which a tree grows (Fig. 14). It is approached via a wooden bridge that reinforces the transition from solid ground to elevated platforms (Fig. 12). In keeping with the minimalism used throughout the project, decks are paper thin without protective handrails in many places, and columns and beams are reduced to the smallest section possible, all stained dark like those at the Jack House.

The walls were all originally made of see-through glass so that the house almost disappears against the bush backdrop (Fig. 13). Not only do the floor-to-ceiling transparent glass outer and inner walls make it possible to see through the house from one side to the other, but they create an illusion of a house made of floor and roof with no physical boundaries between internal spaces or between internal and external ones. The Lucases said of the house, ‘the aims were to leave the site as untouched as possible; to maintain in the building the character of the bush; to provide without frills or fine finishes maximum accommodation and to make up to some extent for the obvious lack of ready-made outdoor living areas’.⁴² The house feels like an enormous treehouse in which occupants live in the air amongst the native Australian trees (Fig. 15). In this way, the Lucases pushed indoor-outdoor living to its limits. The project’s sheer scale, height off the ground, and location in the canopy make it arguably more daring than other contemporary glass houses like Philip Johnson’s Glass House (1949) and Mies van der Rohe’s Farnsworth House (1945–51).

Conclusion

Exchange of ideas occurs in many different ways: through personal relationships, professional associations, publications of architectural work,

⁴² Bill and Ruth Lucas in an article in *Architecture Australia*, Oct.–Dec. 1958. Quoted in ‘Lucas House’, Museums of History NSW, <https://mhns.wa.gov.au/stories/documenting-nsw-homes/lucas-house/>

catalogues of construction systems and materials, travel journals and articles, and public lectures.⁴³ All of these played a part in Australia.

The holdings of Australian library collections attest to how well-informed practitioners were about new ideas emerging overseas. In addition to purchasing monographs on architectural projects, Australian libraries have been subscribing to contemporary foreign architecture journals since early on, especially those printed in English in the UK, United States, and Canada. Unsurprisingly, there are copies of numerous British journals dating to the early 1800s: *Architectural Magazine and Journal of Improvement in Architecture, Building, Furnishing and in the Various Arts and Trades Connected Therewith* from 1834; *The Fine Art Journal: A Weekly Record of Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, Music, the Drama, and Polite Literature* from 1846; the *Royal Institute of British Architects Journal* from 1893; *The Architectural Review* from 1896, and *The Architects Journal* from 1919, are just a few in the New South Wales State Library collection, along with the *American Architectural Record* from 1891; *Scientific American, Architects and Builders Edition* from 1885; *American Homes and Gardens* from 1905; and the *Journal of American Institute of Architects* from 1913. The State Library of Victoria has similar holdings, including some publications not in the New South Wales Library, like *The American Architect and Building News* from 1876 and *The Canadian Architect and Builder* from 1888.

Recent scholarship by Naomi Stead, Paul Hogben, Philip Goad, Katti Williams, and Julie Willis has documented the breadth of overseas experience Australian architects had in the 19th and 20th centuries.⁴⁴ Their research shows the extent to which Australian architects have always travelled as part of their professional development in order to study, work, and tour to see important buildings. In the interwar period, new scholarships made travel accessible to aspiring and early-career architects

⁴³ Philip Goad identified five ways that modernism developed in Australia in 'Modernism and Australian Architecture: Part of the Critical Filter': travel, books, catalogues, lectures, journals, to which Julie Willis added a sixth, networking.

⁴⁴ See, for instance, Stead and Hogben (2004); Goad and Willis (2006); Willis and Williams (2021): 358.

regardless of their economic status, like the Australian and Medallion Travelling Scholarships in New South Wales and the Robert and Ada Haddon Scholarship in Victoria. Destinations included the United Kingdom, continental Europe, and the United States, where in the early 20th century work by the emerging avant-garde was a major attraction. Writing for *Architecture Australia* in 1977, David Saunders found 'that something like twenty percent of the Australian profession may have been overseas'.⁴⁵ Not only did many Australian architects travel but they chronicled their travels in public lectures and in Australian journals and magazines upon return helping disseminate the latest ideas. A 1926 article called 'Architecture and Travel' in *The Mercury* reports that the speaker, Alan C. Walker RIBA asserted, 'in order to know architecture it was vitally necessary to travel...while it was possible to know buildings from photographs and pictures, it was only possible to appreciate them fully by seeing them in the surroundings for which they had been designed'.⁴⁶ Publications in Australian magazines include essays like the 1929 article by Professor A. L. Sadler on 'Japanese Architecture', and 1938 articles by Bunning titled, 'Mainly European Travel', and A. H. Mack titled, 'Continental Tour'.⁴⁷ Such articles were often the published version of a public lecture (the travelling fellowships often required such talks) or were accompanied by public lectures.

In addition to information that Australians brought home, new migrants to Australia like Hugo Stossel in 1938, Eva and Hugh Buhrich in 1939, and Henry Epstein in 1939, to name just a few who practiced in greater Sydney, brought the latest ideas with them.⁴⁸ They also had networks of colleagues overseas to whom they disseminated information about their adoptive country and its architecture.

Although it is very difficult to prove which Australian concepts were taken up overseas, Australian architecture was covered continuously in the British press from soon after settlement and Australian design ideas

⁴⁵ Saunders (1977): 23. Quoted in Willis and Williams (2021): 358.

⁴⁶ 'Architecture and Travel' (1926): 9.

⁴⁷ Sadler (1927): 121–128. Bunning (1938): 154–164.

⁴⁸ Hawcroft (2017).

were definitely circulating beyond Australian shores by the 1920s.⁴⁹ Some Australian work was exhibited in the United Kingdom, like William Hardy Wilson's drawings which were shown in a blockbuster exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1923, later published in his book, *Old Colonial Architecture of New South Wales and Tasmania* (1924).⁵⁰ Avant-garde Australian design was published in British journals like *Architectural Review* and the *Royal Institute of British Architects Journal*. Architecture journals in France, Germany, and the United States increasingly covered Australian design in the post-Second World War period, if not before. Not only did Australian architects like Ancher, Baldwinson, Bunning, Grounds, Stephenson, and other leaders of the modern movement study, work, and tour abroad, but they maintained close ties with colleagues in other countries, especially in the UK and United States. These included important innovators like Maxwell Fry, Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, and Oskar Niemeyer, as well as lesser known and unknown practitioners with whom they had worked. The personal ties Australian architects had meant that architectural ideas were circulating both ways – to and from Australia – and therefore were an integral part of the global discourse.

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⁴⁹ A search of the British Library archives online has newspaper articles about Australian architecture from 1800.

⁵⁰ Van der Plaats (2018): 74.

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Kultūros pernaša: naujas kelias suprasti Australijos avangardą

Santrauka

Šiuolaikinė architektūra už vadinamų Europos ir Jungtinių Valstijų centrų ribų ilgą laiką buvo vertinama kaip neoriginalios regioninės importuotų idėjų kopijos. Ne kitaip yra ir Australijos moderniosios architektūros tyrinėjimuose. Tačiau kultūra niekada neatsiranda tik vienoje pasaulio dalyje, ji visada buvo ir yra tarptautinių mainų produktas. Iš užsienio atvežtos idėjos visada buvo sudėtingų priėmimo, pritaikymo ir reinterpretavimo procesų objektas. Šiame straipsnyje analizuojami keli svarbūs 1930–1960 m. laikotarpio Australijos tekstai ir pastatai, siekiant atskleisti kai kuriuos moderniosios estetikos formavimosi būdus, kurie atsirado reaguojant į užsienio idėjas ir unikalų Australijos klimatą, gamtą bei gyvenimo būdą.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: Australijos architektūra, Australijos modernizmas, kritinis regionalizmas, kultūros pernaša