

# Conscious design: the Melbourne University Architectural Atelier 1919-1947

Julie Willis

In antipodean Australia, there is always an assumption that trends in architecture arrive late, are invariably not ‘done right’ and that local variation is a corruption of the true thing. This is most strongly evident in the consideration of the introduction and evolution of modernism in Australia. Physical isolation meant Australian architects rarely experienced the new ideas in architecture firsthand, instead relying on exhibitions, publications, the migration of architects and education.<sup>1</sup> Yet the role of architectural education in considering the development of modernism in Australia in the 1920s and 1930s is relatively under-explored.

It is easy to dismiss Australian architectural education between the two world wars as a corruption of both Ecole des Beaux-Arts teaching and Bauhaus ideas. Instead of a dedicated adoption of established educational techniques, Australian architectural educators utilized those aspects that suited the local situation. In doing so, they established a meeting point between the aesthetic refinement and compositional technique of the Beaux-Arts, the technical and functional sensibility of European modernism and the requirements of the local profession. Despite its distance from Europe and North America, Australian architects and educators were cognizant of the developments of modernism and this was quickly reflected in the students’ work. Far from lagging behind, Australian architectural education responded quickly to new ideas yet did not slavishly follow them.

The Melbourne University Architectural Atelier (1919-1947)<sup>2</sup> played an important role in promoting modern architecture in Australia. Based initially on the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, it adapted that architectural pedagogy to suit the local conditions and reflect new trends in architecture. The Atelier’s emphasis on composition and form, rather than a single accepted architectural style, fostered a culture of experimentation and a confident adoption of modernism amongst Australian architects. As an example of the new educational approaches to architecture being adopted to varying degrees across Australia during the interwar period, the Atelier’s legacy demonstrates that architectural education had an instrumental role in shaping Australia’s engagement with modernism.

The Atelier was formed in 1919 to teach architectural design and composition to young architects, one of the first institutions to incorporate the specific study of architectural design in its curriculum in Australia.<sup>3</sup> Although a number of architectural clubs devoted to design flourished in Victoria between 1890 and 1920<sup>4</sup> and several institutions offered studies in architecture, including the

Gordon Institute of Technology (now Deakin University) and the Melbourne Working Mens' College (now RMIT University),<sup>5</sup> the establishment of the Atelier was a significant academic challenge to the established methods of architectural education that relied on articulated apprenticeship for the teaching of architectural design.<sup>6</sup> The Atelier thus helped to profoundly change the direction of architectural education in Australia, attracting a very significant proportion of young architects and architectural students in Melbourne (as well as many from interstate), from its inception to World War II. It also became a crucial place for the discussion and dissemination of ideas about what the nature of contemporary architecture might be through its unwavering concentration on architectural design and its legacy would be an enduring spirit of design experimentation that continued well into the 1950s, evident in the structural experimentation of the so-called Melbourne School. The Atelier would teach a generation of Melbourne's leading architects, including: Osborn McCutcheon, Geoffrey Mewton, Haslet and Roy Grounds, Alan Fildes, Cynthea Teague, Alan Ralton, Don Ward, Roy Prentice, Raymond Schmerberg (Berg), Tom O'Mahony, Roy Simpson, Ross Stahle, Lloyd Orton, John Mockeridge and Ron Lyon.

### The idea of design: the Atelier's creation

Despite the availability of lectures in architecture from the 1890s in Australian universities, the predominant method for gaining an architectural education in Australia was through a period of articles with a practicing architect, a system that was only gradually superseded by diploma and then degree courses. The hiatus of World War I allowed the reinvigoration of formal architectural education in Australia and by 1918 a number of courses that led to formal qualifications were well-established. Courses included study in a range of subjects, including natural philosophy (physics), chemistry, surveying, materials, building construction, drawing and history of architecture but offered no specific study of architectural design. The Atelier thus became a crucial part of completing the architectural education of diploma and articulated students alike.

With the completion by a number of students of the University of Melbourne's Diploma of Architecture,<sup>7</sup> it became apparent that there was a place for further education in architecture for such students, as well as others. Rodney Alsop (1881-1932), an established Melbourne architect who had been recently appointed acting lecturer in charge of the Diploma of Architecture, proposed the creation of the Melbourne University Architectural Atelier in March 1918. He called for

the formation of an Atelier or Architectural Studio, such as is adopted in all the principal European Countries and very extensively in the United States of America. These Ateliers are for the encouragement and advancement of the younger Architects, Draftsmen and Senior Students, who have attained proficiency in the draftsmanship [sic] and Building Construction and who wish to turn their attention to the finer problems of design, composition and rendering, in competition with their fellow members, and under criticism and assistance from the Instructor in charge, and from leading practitioners, who support the atelier.<sup>8</sup>

The Atelier would hold its classes at night, but students would have keys so that they could work in the studio at any time. The classes would be based about set design problems, with students expected to produce both preliminary (*esquisse*)

## Conscious Design: the Melbourne Atelier 1919-1947

and final design (*projet rendu*, although not referred to as such within the Atelier literature) proposals for critique. The educational aims of the Atelier were to:

- 1) [gain] Experience in handling the larger problems in the design of monumental and general Architecture.
- 2) The proper rendering of advanced Architectural drawing with co-ordination of style.
- 3) Increase of efficiency in design and draftsmanship.<sup>9</sup>

Although part of the University's School of Architecture, the Atelier offered no formal qualifications, just further education for young architects that they could take up as they saw fit.

The Faculty of Engineering, of which the School of Architecture was then a part, encouraged the proposal, adding a management committee representing both the Faculty and the local professional body, the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects (RVIA),<sup>10</sup> and it was duly passed by University Council in May 1918. The Atelier opened its doors in temporary accommodation in early 1919.

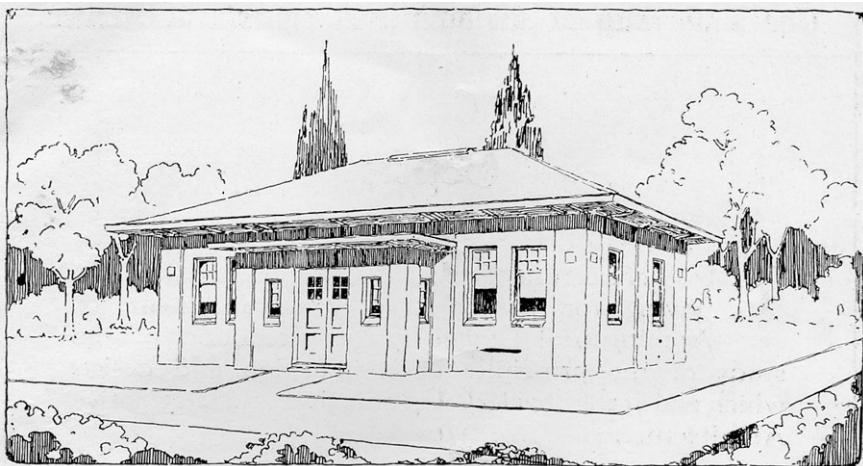


Figure 1: The Atelier Drafting Room, c1920. Delineator unknown.  
Source: *University of Melbourne Architectural Atelier Prospectus*, 1921.

Leighton Irwin (1892-1962), Assistant Director of the Atelier from 1920, summed up its ethos in a printed open letter to prospective Atelier students for the 1921 academic year:

The Atelier must not be considered a school—on the contrary, its internal organisation is entirely controlled by the members themselves...

The building is open night and day during the University terms, and members are free to come and go as they please...

...the work carried out here is in a spirit of co-operation, and, at the same time, friendly rivalry. The social spirit is fostered, and at such times as criticisms take place, outside friends are invited to attend.<sup>11</sup>

This would be further expanded upon in 1923:

The training of the Atelier is based on the principle that the Architect must know how to compose before beginning to construct.

The Student is taught that in attacking a problem he must first of all get hold of the part that really matters, he is then in a position to carry his scheme to a successful conclusion, being careful, through, at all times to keep in view the ultimate results for which he is striving; in short, the application of the principles of reason, logic, and method.

The object of the Atelier, however, does not end with the teaching of the principles of design. It has another important duty to perform, in promoting generally the feeling of good fellowship. The Social side is fostered, and thus is gradually formed a centre of communal activity where members may work and play in an atmosphere of enthusiasm formed by the spirit of their environment.

Students who seek to improve their knowledge, the true principles of Architecture will, by joining the Atelier, gain the greatest possible benefit for all through the emulation resulting from work done in common.<sup>12</sup>

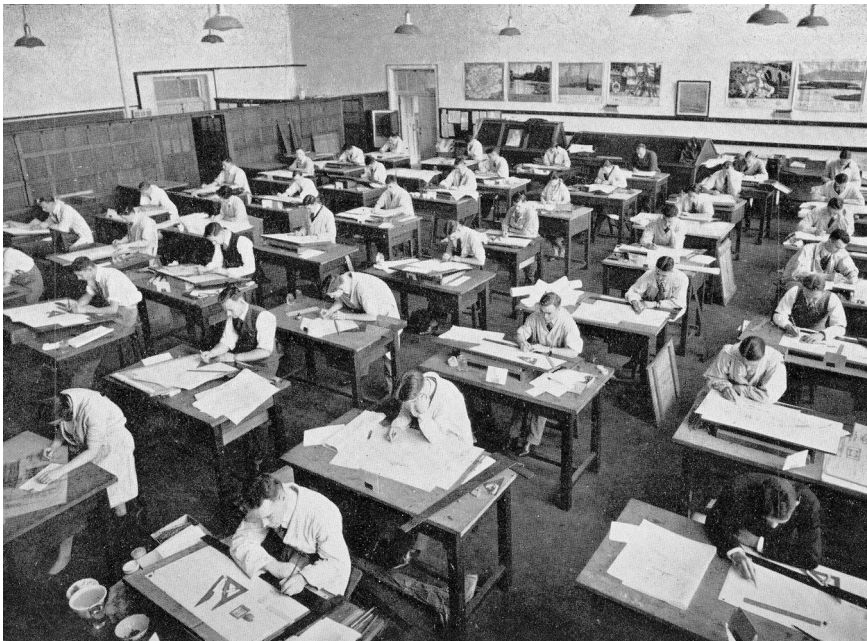


Figure 2: The Atelier Drafting Room, c1930. Photographer unknown.

Source: *Bulletin of the University of Melbourne Architectural Atelier*, 1931, p 32.

Such was the relaxed and collective nature of the Atelier in its early years, that few records were created or kept as to who were the student members and what was their program of study. Although established by University Council in 1918, full details of the course did not appear in the University *Calendar* until 1920<sup>13</sup> and it took until the following year for printed publicity, including a prospectus, to be available. It is thought the first enrolment was around five students,<sup>14</sup> a modest beginning, but there were still relatively few graduates of



## Conscious Design: the Melbourne Atelier 1919-1947

the Diploma and many potential students still enlisted. In 1920, when the first records appear, the total enrolment was eight and the following year that leapt to 25, including two women.<sup>15</sup> Returned soldiers had already significantly swelled the ranks of the Diploma course and it is clear the Atelier enjoyed a similar increase. The increased intake of around twelve new students a year was sustained until the mid-1920s, only to significantly rise again in the second half of the decade.

The relaxed beginnings of the Atelier would soon give way to a more structured arrangement. As Freeland puts it, “frail mortals were not up to carrying out such an idealistic plan, the Atelier was forced to adopt the restrictions and disciplines of normal classes—compulsory attendance, fixed work timetables and regular hours.”<sup>16</sup> In response to the five-year Bachelor of Architecture course established at the University in 1927, a Diploma of Architectural Design was created in 1928, which enabled Atelier students to gain a recognized qualification from their years of study.<sup>17</sup>

### Educating the profession: the finishing school

The close involvement in the Atelier by the RVIA from its inception was an important part of its structure and position within architectural education in Victoria. The profession previously had little involvement with formal architectural education, apart from various calls for a Professorial Chair in Architecture. Indeed, the profession continued to strongly support articles in combination with formal architectural education as the preferred method of training architects.<sup>18</sup>

The Atelier represented a transitional phase for Australian architectural education. In the United States, formal degree courses in architecture had become an expected part of an architect’s education by 1900.<sup>19</sup> Although the Australian profession recognized the value of architectural education in its quest for professionalization, it was not until after World War II that formal qualifications in architecture became standard. The strong role of the RVIA in the Atelier gave crucial professional recognition for the Atelier’s standing and brought benefits to Atelier students through the waiving of key Institute and RIBA entrance examinations. Such professional contact brought more than kudos, it brought in articulated students whose employers were Institute members.

Beside strong involvement by the profession, there were a number of factors that set apart the education offered at the Atelier to ordinary formal degree or diploma courses in Australia. The Atelier was the only Australian institution that offered intensive architectural studies to the equivalent of graduate students. The Atelier thus drew on a large pool of prospective students, from those undertaking articles alone, to those who had attended classes at one of four or five institutions in Victoria offering various forms of architectural study. This ‘graduate’ focus was an important factor in both the success and influence of the Atelier.

Initially only about a third of Atelier students had undertaken the University’s Diploma course, the remainder being articulated students seeking further education in design. The Atelier’s self-directed program of study and the natural independence of the articulated students helped maintain the Atelier’s standards

across the decades of its existence. For many, the Atelier became a finishing school in design, allowing students a variety of ways of gaining architectural education to suit their circumstances, but with a common end point, recognized for its quality and standing within the profession.

The Atelier also enjoyed relatively independent status. As an institution that was formed between the profession and the University, it was under neither group's complete control. The type of students it attracted, its interest in the pursuit of scholarship rather than qualification and its collective nature gave it a club-like atmosphere, akin to London's Architectural Association. Its independence and self-sufficiency allowed it to pursue curriculum that could quickly respond to changing ideas and trends in architecture. Such independence would be key to both its success and eventual demise.

### Local conditions: the Beaux-Arts and Architectural Association in Melbourne

The Atelier was to be based on the teaching methods of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and Beaux-Arts inspired schools in the United States, but there is little evidence to suggest that those promoting and creating the Atelier had ever attended European or American schools. Britain's Royal Academy was also cited regularly in Atelier publications as a source of educational curricula, but few Atelier instructors had the opportunity to attend. Alsop, for instance, spent time in Europe and Britain travelling with his family in 1900 but not with the intention of gaining architectural qualification in Britain: he returned to begin his articles in Melbourne in 1901.<sup>20</sup> Thus the Atelier's understanding of Beaux-Arts teaching principles was gleaned from journal articles, remote professional contact and brief visits to British schools, taking the basic principles of problem-based design and open critique to meld its own version of the Beaux-Arts in Melbourne.<sup>21</sup> The result was a school that, through its isolation and mixture of antecedents, encouraged a range of design methodologies, not a single ideal.

The Atelier's opening coincided with the end of World War I and provided the ideal opportunity for recently demobilized young men to return to their architectural studies. In London, the Architectural Association (AA) was providing the same opportunity and a number of Australian architects attended AA classes en route to Australia, including Leighton Irwin. Such first-hand knowledge of British architectural education would be brought to the Melbourne Atelier with Irwin's appointment as Assistant Director in 1920. At the AA, Howard Robertson had just instated an atelier, which replaced the old evening school, as one of a number of ateliers affiliated to the Royal Academy<sup>22</sup> and was very similar in aim and style to the Melbourne Atelier.

In its early days, the Atelier was relatively relaxed and informal, although greater structure and qualifications were brought in over time. Some of the changes evident in the Atelier were the creation of separate grades for students. The *Prospectus* of 1921 showed the students were divided into two grades to allow "more advanced students to progress rapidly and to give those who have had less experience the opportunity of picking up the methods."<sup>23</sup> The following year, the *Prospectus* noted three grades, known "for the sake of convenience as First, Second and Third Years."<sup>24</sup> Within the grades, the curriculum was separated

## Conscious Design: the Melbourne Atelier 1919-1947

giving each year a different focus. First Year concentrated on the “application of Architectural History to Design” as well as “composition and advanced drafting methods.” Second Year concentrated on the “Architectural treatment of the Elevations and Section of Buildings, in any Style, in conjunction with a well composed plan” and Third Year required an “advanced knowledge of planning and the principles of decoration.”<sup>25</sup> Like the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, students were expected to pass a certain number of projects before proceeding into the next grade, but the Atelier offered no grand final competition or prize to strive toward. The education was an end in itself.

### Diversity in design: the 1920s

The student work was profiled in the Atelier’s *Prospectus* (later *Bulletin*) and showed a significant diversity of design methods. Although the designs were clearly related to Australian architectural tastes of the day, they demonstrated progressive ideas. As was frequently noted in the *Bulletin*’s commentary, beyond first year students were not expected to conform to a particular style, instead “imaginative design on sound lines is fostered.”<sup>26</sup>



Figure 3: Osborn McCutcheon, ‘An Electrical Sub Station’, 1922.  
Source: *University of Melbourne Architectural Atelier Prospectus*, 1923, p 4.

Until the mid-1930s, the first year work involved preparing small projects in a particular historical style, such ‘An Entrance to a Museum’ in the Romanesque style or an Egyptian ‘Electric Sub-Station’ (fig 3). These were meant to demonstrate the appropriate use of historic styles ‘when applied to modern conditions’, but the lesson learnt seemed to be that these styles were inappropriate for the modern condition, as they rarely if ever appeared in the work of more senior students.

The work of second and third year students was more indicative of the varied and changing approaches to design encouraged by the Atelier. Depending on the nature or type of the project, specific styles, methods or presentation techniques would be adopted. Beaux-Arts compositional techniques, for instance, were common but usually applied to specific urban or civic projects. Large urban design projects, usually referred to as town planning, used the bird’s eye perspective of the City Beautiful movement. Domestic projects, on the other hand, utilized picturesque planning and Arts & Crafts vernaculars (fig 4). During the 1920s, restrained formal classicism (from Greek to French Second Empire), as well as stripped versions of Egyptian, Assyrian and other ancient styles were generally reserved for the most important and urban projects, like banks, hotels and court houses (fig 5). Less prominent civic projects, like schools, often used the Australian Colonial (Georgian) Revival or similar plain styles (fig 6). These were formal symmetrical compositions that owed much to

the Beaux-Arts approach, but could also exhibit picturesque qualities, depending on the interests of the student. Evident in all the early work was a subtle grading of the type of project and its appropriate style and composition.

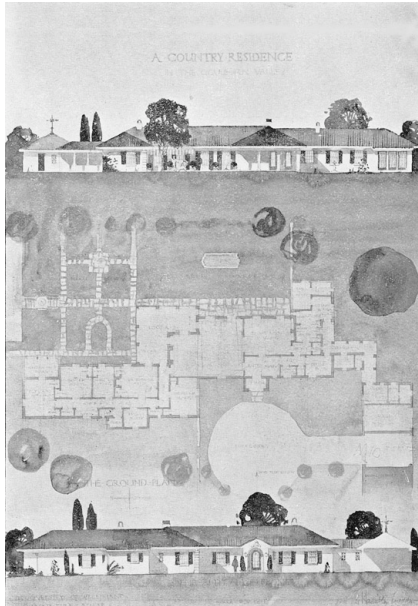


Figure 5: Brian B Lewis, 'A Farmhouse', 1927.  
Source: *Bulletin of the University of Melbourne Architectural Atelier*, 1928, p 22.

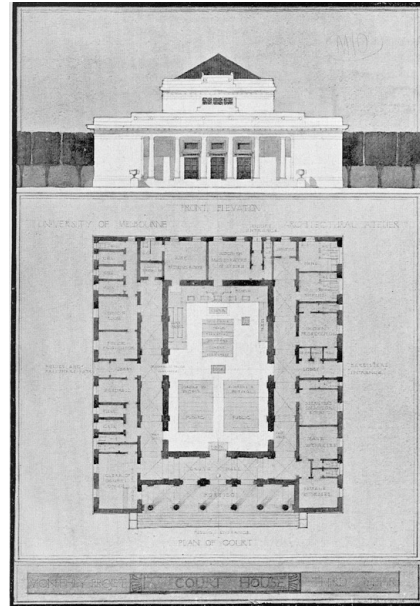


Figure 4: J C Aisbett, 'A Court House', 1923.  
Source: *University of Melbourne Architectural Atelier Bulletin*, 1924, p 9.

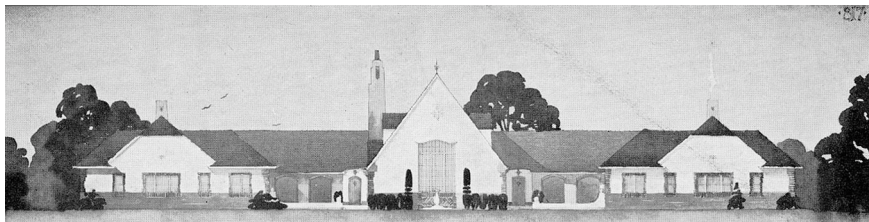


Figure 6: Cynthea Teague, 'An Almshouse' elevation, 1928.  
Source: *Bulletin of the University of Melbourne Architectural Atelier*, 1929, p 26.

It is important to understand the Atelier work in the context of the broader trends in Australian architecture at the time. Although forms were less elaborate than pre-World War I work, with a move towards more restrained styles and designs, Australian architecture did not immediately embrace the modern architecture being developed in Europe. Throughout the 1920s, architects looked to a multitude of past styles for their inspiration, with an emphasis on taste, strength and simplicity.<sup>27</sup> Like the Atelier work, the style chosen was dependent on the building type, thus domestic designs drew on bungalow, Mediterranean and

## Conscious Design: the Melbourne Atelier 1919-1947

English Domestic Revival styles, while civic and commercial work looked instead to classical precedents and their derivatives, including the Greek, Roman, Renaissance and Georgian revivals.

The local profession may have been slow to respond to new international design ideas, but from the mid-1920s, Atelier students were demonstrating familiarity with overseas trends. In 1924, second year student D B White contributed a jazz moderne interior (fig 7) to the Atelier *Bulletin*,<sup>28</sup> predating any built versions of the style in Melbourne by at least five years. When the students employed styles then common amongst Australian architects, the student projects were generally more restrained, with greater emphasis on plain expanses of wall, reduced and simple detailing and particular attention paid to composition and massing.

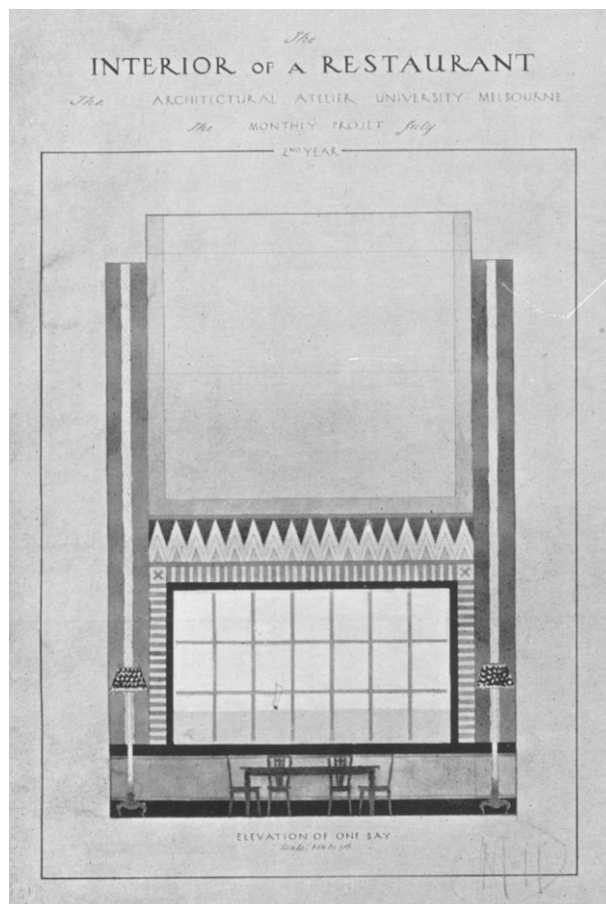


Figure 7: D B White, 'A Study in Interior Decoration', 1924.

Source: *Bulletin of the University of Melbourne Architectural Atelier*, 1925, p 12.

## Driving force: Leighton Irwin

The figure of Leighton Irwin played a pivotal role in the success and design agenda of the Atelier. Appointed Assistant Director in 1919, he quickly became the Atelier's driving force, succeeding Rodney Alsop as Director in 1926. Irwin, by all accounts, was a humourless and exacting master who pushed his students to produce the best they could.

Apart from being the Atelier Director, he was also a successful architect. Irwin's early work was mostly domestic, but from the 1930s, he gained a number of important large commissions, including the modernist Mildura Base Hospital (1930) and the severe stripped Classicism of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (1935).<sup>29</sup> Later Irwin would design a number of acclaimed hospitals, including Prince Henry's Hospital (1940-1955, now dem) and the Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital (c1940s), both of which owed much to European precedents. All of his built works demonstrated an unwavering commitment to modern architecture tempered by a respect for classical repose, the designs for which were usually at the leading edge of Australian architecture. Through his contribution to local journals, Irwin promoted the ideas of modern architecture to a broad audience. His hand in the Atelier was unmistakable. Upon his return from travelling in Europe in 1929,<sup>30</sup> both his own design work and that of the Atelier would change radically in favour of European modernism.

## The new aesthetic: modernism in the Atelier

Irwin's influence over his students was clear by the change in Atelier work during his absence. Student work of 1929 was far more conservative than it had been before Irwin's sabbatical in its choice of style and composition, leaning back to Beaux-Arts formalism. From Irwin's return in 1930, the influence of Erich Mendelsohn was evident in Atelier work and many projects had elements in common with Bijvoet & Duiker's Zonnestraal Sanatorium (1928), work by J J P Oud (fig 8), and the most recent European-inspired British architecture (fig 9).<sup>31</sup> Stripped and formal classicism was quickly replaced with horizontal stretches of glass, curving balconies and unadorned expanses of wall, demonstrated through an increasing number of industrial projects (figs 10 & 12). The method of presentation also changed: instead of elevations, students often chose to illustrate perspectives (figs 8, 10 & 11); and working drawings became more prevalent. The *Bulletin's* commentary echoed the new ideas: "The development of [student's] own imagination and powers

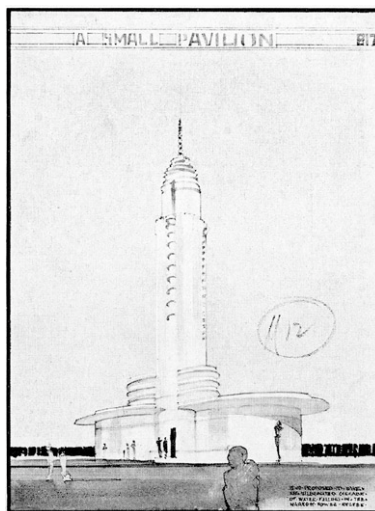


Figure 8: 'A Small Pavilion', 1930.  
Delineator unknown.

Source: *Bulletin of the University of Melbourne Architectural Atelier*, 1931, p 26.



## Conscious Design: the Melbourne Atelier 1919-1947

is aimed at Functional design. Where precedence is absent a knowledge of principles is the only substitute.”<sup>32</sup> One of Australia’s key architectural historians, Robin Boyd, has declared that “Up to 1934 everything modern that happened was an isolated phenomenon.”<sup>33</sup> But at the Atelier, from 1930 modernism was the dominant language and its leading students destined to become important design architects of the new generation.

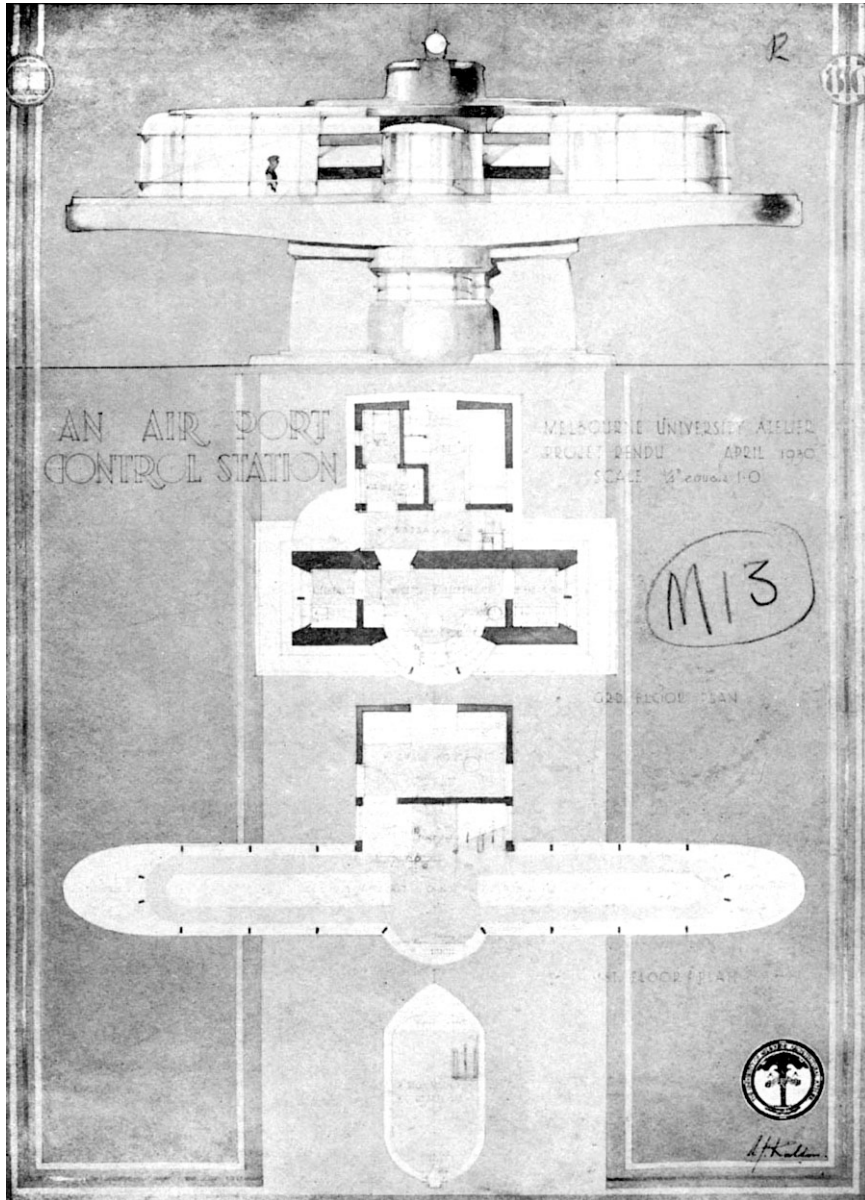


Figure 9: A J Ralton, 'A Control Tower for an Air-Port', 1930.

Source: *Bulletin of the University of Melbourne Architectural Atelier*, 1931, p 21.

New inspirations, forms and presentation techniques had swept the Atelier, but the pedagogical method remained *Beaux-Arts*. The local version of the *Beaux-Arts* basic formula had always allowed the consideration of design methodologies other than formal Classicism. The diversity of design approaches and styles encouraged within the Atelier allowed the immediate adoption of new ideas, without necessarily affecting the method by which design was taught.

The lessons of modernism came as an imported new language to the Atelier (courtesy of Irwin's photographs and newly published journals and books) rather than a complete design ethos and thus carried few political or social associations. Housing, so key to European modernism, remained almost untouched by the new forms, encouraged instead as a genuinely Australian result: "The aim of the Atelier is to support the development of a domestic architecture which is the natural outcome of the climate, materials, and social conditions of our own country."<sup>34</sup> The Atelier culture of working with different architectural languages, depending on the student's interest and the type of project would also persist. Imagination and experimentation were highly valued, above any particular style or direction: "The stimulation of a student's imagination tends to counteract the herd instinct liable to modern design."<sup>35</sup>

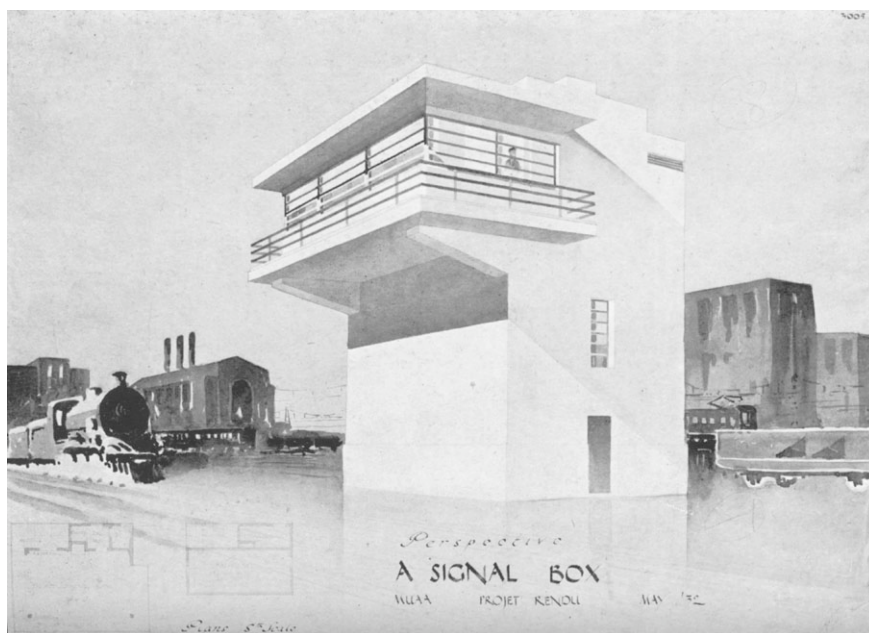


Figure 10: J D Fisher, 'A Signal Box', 1932.

Source: *Bulletin of the University of Melbourne Architectural Atelier*, 1933, p 16.

### Modernizing the method: encouraging experimentation

Irwin would again instigate significant change on the direction of the Atelier in the mid-1930s.<sup>36</sup> Although it is not evident as to whether he sought to change the direction of the Atelier from 1936 through experience garnered from further European travels or from published sources, the shift in both the description of

## Conscious Design: the Melbourne Atelier 1919-1947

the curriculum and published projects was clear. Two 1936 first year projects by Grenfell Ruddock indicate beginnings of the shift, with the first ‘The Evolution of the Opening’ being described as an “example of the new method of studying Design being developed at the Atelier.” The second project was a massing study that was “a study of fundamentals, going backwards to move forward.”<sup>37</sup>

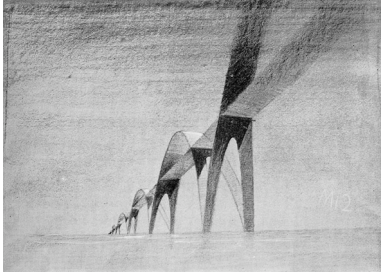


Figure 11: Bridge design, 1933.  
Delineator unknown.  
Source: *Bulletin of the University of Melbourne Architectural Atelier*, 1934

Much of the functionalist modernism emanating from Europe had its origins in the tradition of European technical universities, where the emphasis was on good building combined with sophisticated engineering rather than the conscious aestheticism of the Beaux-Arts or the Arts & Crafts Movement. At the Bauhaus, the emphasis was on making, rather than drawing. But at the Atelier, drawing remained the principal medium for design and thus there appeared to be little interest in wholeheartedly adopting European methods of architectural education.

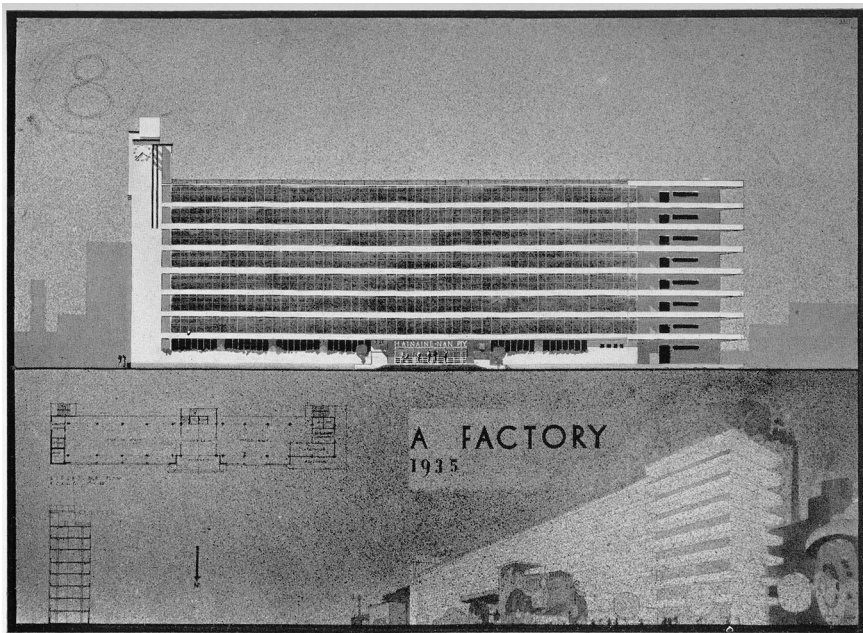


Figure 12: R Schmerberg, ‘A Factory’, 1935.  
Source: *Bulletin of the University of Melbourne Architectural Atelier*, 1936, p 23.

Le Corbusier’s recommendations in *Vers une architecture* (available in English translation from 1927) instead offered a method for modernism that was more relevant for the local situation. Le Corbusier’s description of mass, surface and plan reads like a written instruction for a typical Atelier *esquisse* of the late 1930s. Thus the Atelier’s approach to new methods of teaching in the 1930s



emerged beneath the mantle of Beaux-Arts representational techniques but fully cognizant of Le Corbusier's prescriptions. Technique, and in some respect the continued use of the *analytique* drawing, tempered the revolutionary aspects of the new architecture's aesthetic.

First Year exercises in historical styles were thus replaced by investigations into the development of a building material or structural element over time. Vestiges of the Beaux-Arts heritage of the Atelier were quietly removed, with short exercises no longer referred to as *esquisse* and emphasis placed on massing, rather than stylistic composition. In 1937, the *Bulletin's* text further demonstrated change: "An understanding of the fundamentals of massing, scale and proportion are of more importance than a knowledge of style"; and "Good design has no period. It is the successful application of the purpose and the circumstances which called it into being."<sup>38</sup> This would be more and more translated into compositional exercises into the early 1940s with the accompanying designs experimenting with functional form, structure and materials.

Although there was greater attention paid to functionalism and fundamental design principles in the Atelier from the mid-1930s, these changes weren't at odds with the basic philosophy of the school, which had always encouraged experimentation, imagination and the best response for the project at hand, regardless of the changing nature of project types or design exercises.

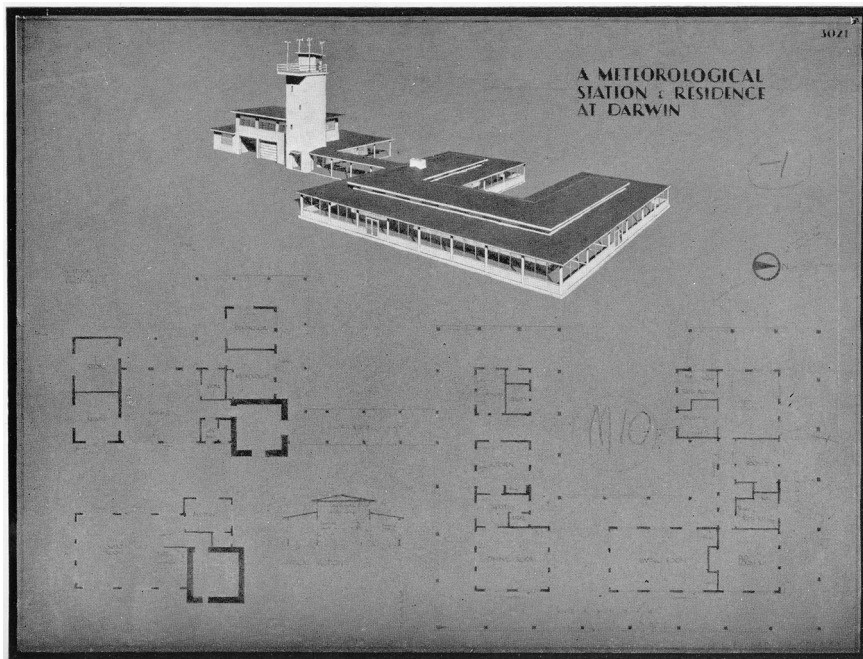


Figure 14: A J Perry, 'A Meteorological Station', 1935.

Source: *Bulletin of the University of Melbourne Architectural Atelier*, 1936, p 22.

# Conscious Design: the Melbourne Atelier 1919-1947

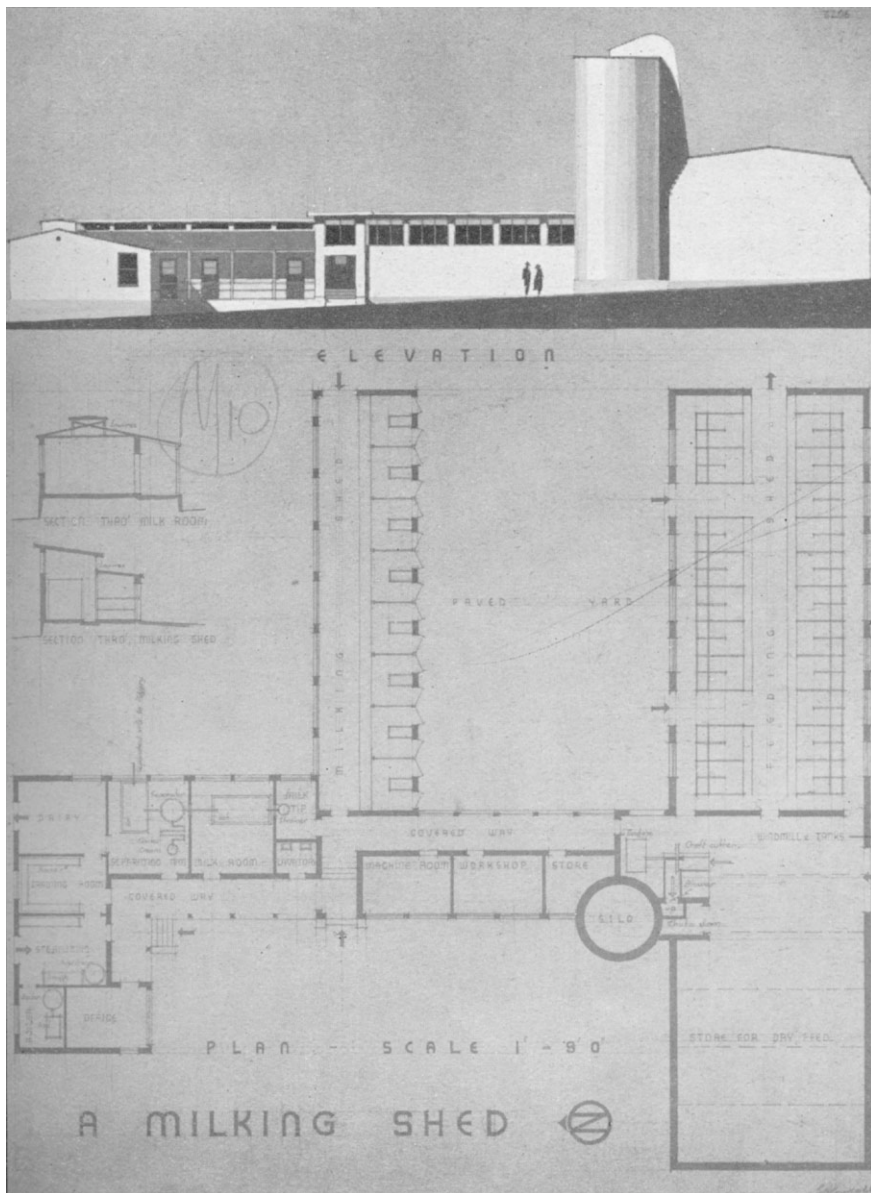


Figure 15: Milking Shed. E M Kendall  
Source: *Bulletin of the University of Melbourne Architectural Atelier*, 1938-1939, p 23.



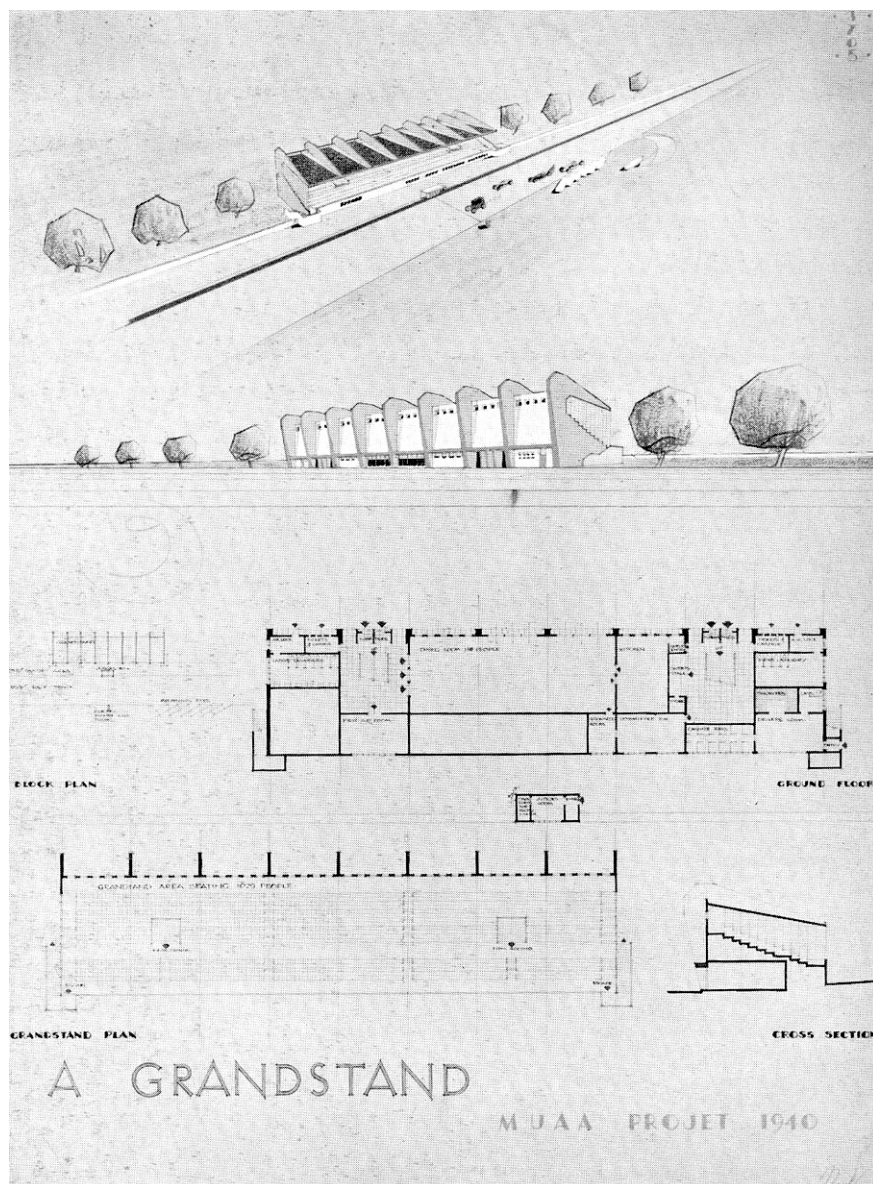


Figure 16: A Mealand, 'A Grandstand', 1940.

Source: *Annual Bulletin of the Melbourne University Architectural Atelier*, 1940-1941, p 20.

As the fears, then realities, of war grew stronger, students experimented with the limits of functional form, structure and materials. The designs illustrated in the last of the *Bulletins* in the early 1940s showed design proposals that would be later realized in post-World War II Australia (figs 15 & 16). These included highrise buildings, houses and other structures that embraced the inventiveness



## Conscious Design: the Melbourne Atelier 1919-1947

and economical use of materials and structure that characterized Australian architecture in the late 1940s and 1950s.

### Post-war rationalism: the Atelier's demise

The Atelier would barely survive WWII and its post-WWII demise came at the hands of one of its former students, Brian Lewis, the University's inaugural Professor of Architecture. Lewis, who had clashed with Irwin as a student,<sup>39</sup> had subsequently completed a Masters degree at Liverpool. He had firm ideas on the way architecture should be taught at Melbourne, but they did not necessarily reflect Liverpool's well-known Beaux-Arts pedagogy. The anomaly of the Atelier in its independence and relevant isolation from the rest of the School (then Faculty) of Architecture, as well as Irwin's forceful personality, had no place in the new order. The Atelier closed within a year of Lewis' 1947 arrival. Scientific rationalism and the integration of all aspects of architecture from construction to design soon replaced the aestheticism of the Atelier.<sup>40</sup>

The Atelier's relaxed adoption of established design pedagogies over its existence meant that it remained relevant to the changing directions of architectural taste. Its adoptions of different curricula were not slavishly truthful to their origins, rather the Atelier adapted such ideas to fit its fundamental ethos of design education through the understanding of composition, form and massing. The Atelier, although greatly aware and encouraging of new design trends, gave a filtered experience of what modern architecture might be. It did not follow the social goals of European modernism (excepting the social goals of the Atelier community itself), instead seeking the cultivation of taste and urban civility within a modern idiom.

The Melbourne University Architectural Atelier developed its architectural pedagogy over time to reflect new ideas in architecture and to suit to the Australian situation. Far more than simply providing formal education to young architects, the Atelier was at the forefront of modern architecture in Australia. The example of the Atelier demonstrates the complexity of the reception and dissemination of modernism. The role that architectural education played in the acceptance of modern architecture was not just the adoption of established methods and forms without question, but instead the adaptation of new ideas to suit the local conditions. The Atelier's unwavering concentration upon design allowed and encouraged young architects' imagination and to experiment, building confidence and skills that allowed them to continue to push the boundaries of modern Australian architecture long into practice.

The author has made every reasonable effort to identify and contact the authors and owners of copyright in the drawings reproduced in this paper. Where this has not occurred, their authors or owners are invited to contact the author.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Philip Goad, 'Modernism and Australian architecture: Part of the Critical Filter', *DOCOMOMO*, 29 (September 2003): 61-68.
- <sup>2</sup> The research for this paper was conducted using the archives of the Melbourne University Architectural Atelier (MUAA), held in the Leighton Irwin (Architecture & Planning) Library, University of Melbourne. The archive consists of original student works, associated documents and the Atelier's yearly publication, the MUAA *Prospectus*, later MUAA *Bulletin*. The *Bulletin* illustrated a representative cross-section of student work from the previous year, with examples from first to third year, with accompanying commentary. The *Bulletin* illustrations demonstrate a wide range of stylistic interpretations by students of the Atelier and considerable interest in new trends in architecture.
- <sup>3</sup> The University of Sydney also began offering design studies through its four-year Bachelor of Architecture course from the end of World War I. J M Freeland, *The Making of a Profession A History of the Growth and Work of the Architectural Institutes in Australia*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1971, pp 219-220.
- <sup>4</sup> The clubs included the Victorian Architectural Students' Society (VASS) and the T-Square Club. Although influential in their time, they did not offer instruction to students in a formal way nor had strong institutional ties. The T-Square Club, which had strong ties to the Arts & Crafts Movement, included both architects and artists among its members and maintained strict nomination criteria. For instance, women were not permitted to be members – a policy that the club maintains to this day. In contrast, the Atelier was open to all architects and students who had attained at least three years experience in architecture (either through articles or formal education).
- <sup>5</sup> Architectural instruction was then also available at Swinburne Technical College in Hawthorn and, in a very limited way, through some regional institutions, like the Bendigo School of Mines. For a full description of the development of the various architecture schools in Australia, see Freeland's chapter on architectural education in Australia in *The Making of a Profession*, pp 202-230.
- <sup>6</sup> S Murray-Smith & A J Dare, *The Tech: A Centenary History of the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology*, South Yarra, VIC: Hyland House, 1987, p 77; and Freeland, *The Making of a Profession*, pp 216-217.
- <sup>7</sup> The first graduand, Edward Fielder Billson, completed the Diploma in 1913.
- <sup>8</sup> Rodney Alsop, 'The University of Melbourne Architectural Atelier', c1918, as reproduced in Miles Lewis, 'The Development of Architectural Teaching in the University of Melbourne', 1970, unpublished report held Faculty of Architecture, Building & Planning, University of Melbourne, p 66.

## Conscious Design: the Melbourne Atelier 1919-1947

- <sup>9</sup> Alsop, 'The University of Melbourne Architectural Atelier', p 66.
- <sup>10</sup> Australia's creation as a nation in 1901 from six separate colonies did not necessarily mean that colonial or state-based institutions disappeared. Each state maintained a separate institute of architects for decades after 1901, with the national Royal Australian Institute of Architects only created in the late 1920s. Even then, some states maintained their independence, the RVIA being the last to join the RAlA in 1968.
- <sup>11</sup> Letter titled 'The University of Melbourne Architectural Atelier' from Leighton Irwin, 15 January 1921, held MUAA archives, University of Melbourne Library.
- <sup>12</sup> 'The University of Melbourne Architectural Atelier Prospectus', 1923, np.
- <sup>13</sup> Lewis, 'The Development of Architectural Teaching in the University of Melbourne', p 69.
- <sup>14</sup> Lewis, 'The Development of Architectural Teaching in the University of Melbourne', p 72.
- <sup>15</sup> Discrepancies are apparent in records of enrolled students. A list of students who were new enrolments from 1920 was retrospectively prepared around 1925 (held MUAA Archives, University of Melbourne Library), but these give higher enrolment numbers than those recorded in the University of Melbourne Fee Books (held Central Records, University of Melbourne) for the equivalent years. For this purpose it is assumed that the Fee Books, prepared at the time of enrolment, are the true record.
- <sup>16</sup> Freeland, *The Making of a Profession*, p 217.
- <sup>17</sup> The Bachelor of Architecture subjects were essentially those of the old Diploma of Architecture and Atelier together, however, the degree students were seen as significantly inferior to the Atelier students. Thus to make up the imbalance of recognition between the B Arch and Atelier students, the Dip Arch Des was created. The combination of Atelier-only and B Arch students from the 1930s makes determining the actual numbers of students working within the Atelier difficult. In the first half of the decade, there were around twenty Atelier-enrolled students each year, but accurate numbers of Atelier-enrolled students beyond that cannot be established.
- <sup>18</sup> For a description of the lack of interest by the architectural institutes in architectural education, see Freeland, *The Making of A profession*, p 214. The RVIA (later RAlA) would later be involved in all Victorian schools of architecture. See Freeland, *The Making of a Profession*, p 217.
- <sup>19</sup> Joan Draper, 'The Ecole des Beaux-Arts and Architectural Profession in the United States: The Case of John Galen Howard', in Spiro Kostof (ed), *The Architect: Chapters in the History of the Profession*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 216.
- <sup>20</sup> David Alsop, 'Rodney Howard Alsop, Architect', Bachelor of Architecture research report, University of Melbourne, 1970.
- <sup>21</sup> This is noted in a contemporary newspaper article on the Atelier, which stated that "Local conditions make slight modifications in the system necessary..." 'Training Architects: Atelier at the University', unreferenced newspaper article, c1919, held MUAA archives, University of Melbourne Library.

- <sup>22</sup> John Summerson, *The Architectural Association 1847-1947*, London: Pleiades Books, 1947, p 44.
- <sup>23</sup> *University of Melbourne Architectural Atelier Prospectus*, 1921, np.
- <sup>24</sup> *University of Melbourne Architectural Atelier Prospectus*, 1922, np.
- <sup>25</sup> *University of Melbourne Architectural Atelier Prospectus*, 1922, np.
- <sup>26</sup> *University of Melbourne Architectural Atelier Bulletin*, 1924, p 9.
- <sup>27</sup> Bryce Rayworth, 'A Question of Style: Inter-war Domestic Architecture in Melbourne', Master of Architecture thesis, University of Melbourne, 1993, p 7.
- <sup>28</sup> *Bulletin of the University of Melbourne Architectural Atelier*, 1925, p 12. Atelier work was published in the following year's *Bulletin*.
- <sup>29</sup> Graeme Butler, 'Irwin, Leighton Major Francis (1892-1962)', in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, 1891-1939, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1986, pp 443-444.
- <sup>30</sup> Lewis, 'The Development of Architectural Teaching in the University of Melbourne', p 73.
- <sup>31</sup> For instance, Stanley Hall, Easton & Robertson's Royal Horticultural Society Hall at Westminster (c1927) with its distinctive parabolic vaulted ceiling in reinforced concrete echoed Max Berg's Jahrhunderthalle in Breslau (1913). The spectacular arched ribs and clerestory windows would find their way into a number of Atelier projects. The modern British work was clearly very influential and examples that the Atelier students would have seen are included in *Recent English Architecture 1920-1940*, London: Country Life, 1947.
- <sup>32</sup> *Bulletin of the University of Melbourne Architectural Atelier*, 1931, pp 20-21.
- <sup>33</sup> Robin Boyd, *Victorian Modern*, Melbourne: Victorian Architectural Students Society, 1947, p 17.
- <sup>34</sup> *Bulletin of the University of Melbourne Architectural Atelier*, 1931, p 22. This statement would be repeated verbatim in subsequent *Bulletins*, including 1934.
- <sup>35</sup> *Bulletin of the University of Melbourne Architectural Atelier*, 1935, p 25.
- <sup>36</sup> Lewis, 'The Development of Architectural Teaching in the University of Melbourne', p 103.
- <sup>37</sup> *Bulletin of the University of Melbourne Architectural Atelier*, 1937, pp 12-13.
- <sup>38</sup> *Bulletin of the University of Melbourne Architectural Atelier*, 1938-1939, pp 14-15.
- <sup>39</sup> Lewis, 'The Development of Architectural Teaching in the University of Melbourne', p 92.
- <sup>40</sup> For a discussion of the rise of scientific rationalism in Australian architecture see Richard Blythe, 'Science enthusiasts: a threat to Beaux-Arts architectural education in Australia in the 1950s', *Fabrications*, 8 (July 1997): 117-128.