

MIGRANT ARCHITECTS PRACTICING MODERN ARCHITECTURE IN SYDNEY, 1930-1960

Rebecca Hawcroft

Godden Mackay Logan, Sydney, Australia

INTRODUCTION

The growing awareness of 20th century heritage has led to a review of the accepted architectural histories that dominated our understanding of the development of modern architecture in Australia. One aspect of this revision must be an appreciation of the production and consumption of modern architecture by the European émigré community.

Preceding the large post-war migration programs the numbers of refugees who arrived in Australia prior to the outbreak of World War II was small, only 8,000 were admitted, yet their impact on the cultural life of Australia was considerable. Amongst these emigres were architects who had studied modern architecture at University level in Europe, often with leading figures in the movement as their teachers, many abandoning promising careers and thriving practices to flee the rise of Nazism.

International discussions of the history of mid twentieth century European émigré architects has focused on the influence and success of Bauhaus Architects in the U.S. and, to a lesser extent the U.K. Australian architectural histories produced in the 1970s and 1980s generally do not. D. L. Johnson's Australian Architecture: Sources of Modernism 1901-1951 notes throughout the text the importance of "European strains" in the local development of the modernism:

*"These were the three decisive factors or communicants in the development of modernism in Australian architecture- immigrants, travelers and magazines"*¹.

The presence of migrants producing modernist architecture is noted however the story of their contribution in that of dominant single personalities working outside the norm, such as Desbrowne Annear, Walter Burley Griffin and later Harry Seidler.

Within Australian architectural historical discourses the great influence of Frederick Romberg and Harry Seidler has been widely accepted, but very little of the presence and production of other émigré architects has been written. Freeland's Architecture in Australia (1968) only refers to Romberg and Seidler. Johnson's Australian Architecture 1901-1951: Sources of Modernism (1980) devotes a chapter to Seidler and makes considerable mention of Romberg and some mention of Victorian émigré architects Ernest Fooks and Karl Langer. Robin Boyd's Australian's Home (1952) refers to Romberg and Seidler and briefly mentions Fritz Janeba. In Australian Ugliness (1960) Boyd mentions Seidler and Czechoslovakian émigré architect Ernest Milston. Yet the great number of migrant architects and the stories of their careers are not contained in these histories. And importantly neither is the considerable contribution migrant clients made to the development of modernism in Australia.

Recent publications have provided a greater focus on the contribution of migrants in Australian in the post war period, including the work of migrant architects. The 1993 'Émigré' edition of Art and Australia² and the National Gallery of Australia's 1997 exhibition and book The Europeans: Émigré Artists in Australia 1930-1960³ mark the beginning of a growing awareness of the cultural legacy of post war migration. There has also recently been a re-examination of the work and experience of migrant architects in Victoria⁴, yet there has been no equivalent work focusing on

¹ Johnson 1980 p.86

² Winter 1993, Vol. 30 No.4

³ Butler, 1997

⁴ Particularly Harriet Edquist's 1993 book and exhibition The Jewish Contribution: A Missing Chapter focusing on the work of Melbourne Jewish Architects since 1945, and Frederick Romberg; The Architecture of Migration 1938-1975, 2000.

the architecture of migrants in Sydney in the period.⁵ Yet the contribution made by these architects is significant. Their careers in Australia demonstrate the complexity of the migration experience, the opportunities for success, and the limitations it offered and the support networks activated within a community that was in many ways separate from mainstream Australian society. The following is a summary of a research thesis focusing on the production of modern architecture within the European émigré community in Sydney from 1930 to 1960.

THE HURDLE OF REGISTRATION

The migrant architect faced many difficulties upon arrival in Australia not least of which was an inability to gain registration. In the 1940s the New South Wales Board of Architects was not registering architects who were not naturalised citizens of the Commonwealth. In 1941 when the recently emigrated Hungarian architect George Molnar applied for registration he was refused on the grounds that he was not a naturalised Australian citizen. The Board's stated policy was to "refrain from registering foreigners, especially those who had come from Europe in recent years"⁶. However even if citizenship was obtained, like the Royal Institute of British Architects, the NSW Board would not recognise qualifications from foreign schools of architecture⁷. Although some could sit further examinations to gain registration, those who were refused were left with limited options.

Similarly the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 closed most architectural offices. For many migrant architects a job in the Public Works Department or similar government office offered secure, if un-stimulating employment. Most migrant architects spent the war years anonymously designing structures for the war effort, if they were not assigned roles as manual labourers doing factory work.⁸

Ferdinand Silberstein-Silvan emigrated from Czechoslovakia with his wife and child in 1949. Perhaps because his degree from a Prague university was not recognised in Australia, he worked for the New South Wales Electricity Commission until his retirement in 1968⁹. Before emigrating Silvan had been a well-known and highly regarded architect practising in the inter-war functionalist style. He had studied at the German College of Technology in Prague and had had his own practice for ten years. During this time he had designed, amongst other things three villas in Bratislava and Dolny Kubin, five blocks of flats in Trencin, three school buildings and other small public buildings. He was a staunch advocate of functionalist principles and these buildings remain highly regarded for the high quality of his realisation of the style. Two of his buildings are now listed by DOCOMOMO and he has recently been the subject of a monograph published in Slovakia¹⁰. Silvan died in Sydney in 1983 unknown in the architecture community. As bright and once successful members of the Jewish middle class the Silvan's marginalised position in Australia must have been frustrating.

⁵ Anne Watson of the Powerhouse Museum has undertaken a study of migrant furniture makers in Sydney in the period.

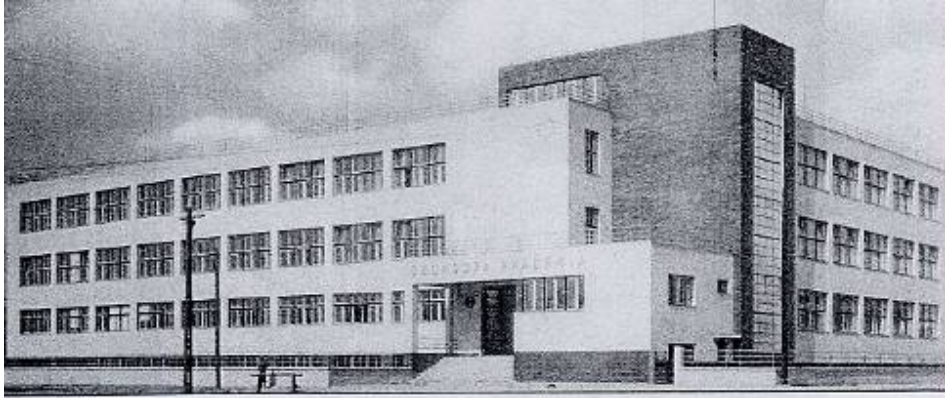
⁶ Molnar registration papers NSW Board of Architects

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Both Hugh Buhrich and Dr. Henry Epstein spent the war years doing manual labour.

⁹ Klara Kubickova, The Silvan Story, published in Slovakia through DOCOMOMO, 2002

¹⁰ Klara Kubickova, The Silvan Story, published in Slovakia through DOCOMOMO, 2002



'Obchodna akademie', Trecin, 1932-1936, by Ferdinand Silvan. Image: [The Silvan Story, 2002](#)

Husband and wife Hugh and Eva Buhrich emigrated from Germany with qualifications from elite European architectural universities. With their qualifications not recognised Eva turned to journalism and Hugh, who remained unregistered until the 1970s, maintained a small private practice by referring to himself as a 'planning consultant' and 'designer'.

In terms of an exposure to 'authentic' modernism there are many parallels between the education of Hugh Buhrich and that of Harry Seidler. Buhrich studied at Berlin University with modernist expressionist architect Hans Poelzig and later worked in Switzerland in the offices of Alfred Roth. Buhrich is perhaps the only architect to work in Australia who had had direct experience of expressionist modernist teachings. Yet while Buhrich was practicing as an architect in Sydney he remained virtually unknown.

Buhrich's early designs, which perhaps most clearly represent a direct connection with his modernist teachings, were disappointingly not realised. Construction of his own house in Edinburgh Road, Castlecrag was halted in 1941 due to a Council imposed war time stoppage on development. It was finally completed in 1948 after extensive debate with Council regarding the aesthetic merits of the design. The house remains today and is recognised as a unique example of modern architecture illustrating Buhrich's sculptural application of modernism. His early designs for clients faced similar difficulties and it was not until 1947 that his first project in Sydney was completed¹¹. Perhaps as a consequence of remaining unregistered during his career Buhrich received no prominent large commissions and is not mentioned in the main historical texts recording the development of modernism in Australia. Today Buhrich's own house of 1972, where he was perhaps best able to fully express his unique application of expressionist modernism, is seen as one of Australia's best modernist houses¹².

The contribution of his wife, Eva Buhrich has also largely unknown. Although she never registered or practiced architecture in Australia she became a prominent commentator on architectural issues with a regular column, 'Living', in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Eva contributed regularly to many magazines and building journals and was probably the first Australian woman to write about these issues under her own by-line in a major Australian newspaper.¹³ She occasionally designed in the popular press and examples of her work can be seen in the *Australian Women's Weekly* in 1946 and *Australian House and Garden*, 1960.¹⁴

¹¹ The Amos Residence, Bayview, was featured on one of the first covers *Australian House and Garden* magazine (January 1949).

¹² Peter Myers in [House; Hugh Buhrich](#), 1972, and highly regarded by Susana Torre in *Harvard Design Magazine*, Summer 1997, pp.28-29

¹³ Bronwyn Hanna and Julie Willis, *Women Architects in Australia 1900-1950* (RAIA, 2001) p.68

¹⁴ "Clever Woman designs a house" *Australian Women's Weekly*, 7/9/1946 and "Split level plan for 40-ft block" *Australian House and Garden*, Feb. 1960, reproduced in Hanna Willis 2001 p.97

ACTIVATING NETWORKS

Despite the many hurdles presented to migrant architect there was a considerable network of support offered to those arriving in Sydney. Some appear to have been able to utilise this support network better than others. The name Peter Kaad regularly appears as a character witness on the registration applications of migrant architects, and it seems the firm Lipson and Kaad was the first port of call for many European arrivals. While Kaad was Australian born of Dutch heritage, Lipson was a Jew, the son of Lithuanian parents who had fled persecution in Russia and settled in Scotland¹⁵. Samuel Lipson had trained in Glasgow and emigrated to New South Wales in 1926. Lipson's family were strict Jews who spoke Yiddish at home. Lipson noted that his religion was often a point of difference and that he had experienced discrimination whilst in Scotland and later from colleagues in Australia¹⁶.

Lipson perhaps represents the previous generation of migrant architects that were, while interested in the Bauhaus principals, rather more influenced by the Dutch modern architecture of Dudok. Initially employed in the public service Lipson later formed his own company with friend Peter Kaad. The firm became one of the most successful and prominent in the period and designed several of the era's best buildings including the Trust Building on King and Castlereagh Streets (1934), S. Hoffnung and Co Ltd Building on Clarence Street (1938) and the streamlined functionalist Hasting Deering Building, off William Street (1937).

In the 1940s the Buhrich's had applied for jobs with Lipson and Kaad but were unsuccessful due to their poor knowledge of Australian building regulations.¹⁷ The firm instead directed them to Professor Alfred Hook. Professor Hook is recalled by many architects of the period as offering great support to those newly arrived. Professor Hook offered informal social network and support basis for migrant architects as well as education as to Australian construction techniques and specialised knowledge required to practice, including the solar design issues faced by Australian architects. Others in the Universities with close ties to the migrant community in the period were fellow émigré architects George Molnar and Emery Blint, both of whom had graduated from the Technical University of Budapest. Molnar taught design at Sydney University for many years before becoming Professor of Architecture at University of New South Wales. Blint was foundation Professor of Building at the University of New South Wales.

Connections with the Jewish community also appear to have been important for this group. In an interview late in his life Samuel Lipson noted that although he did not know members of the Jewish community in Sydney before his arrival he was taken up as a member of "the same village (and) shown around to get to know other people".¹⁸ Lipson had a valuable connection in Abraham Landa, the State Government Minister for Housing who gave him work during the difficult years of World War II. Lipson also notes that like minded architects and artists would gather to discuss modern architecture in the cafes that were beginning to emerge in Sydney, frequently operated by migrants. One café he recalled was Repin's, run by an expatriate Russian.¹⁹

Austrian émigré architect Hans Peter Oser appears to have been a charismatic man who used the network of support provided by the migrant community to move rapidly up the Sydney social ladder. Oser clearly established important networks early as his 1945 application for registration contained an impressive list of referees including J.D. Moore, Walter Bunning and Sydney University's Professor Alfred Hook. Similarly, later in his career, Oser was known for taking on

¹⁵ Samuel Lipson, RAIA Oral History Project, 1992 (unpaginated)

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ Hugh Gordon, *Hugh Buhrich*, University of Sydney 1991 unpublished thesis.

¹⁸ Samuel Lipson, RAIA Oral History Project, 1992 (unpaginated)

¹⁹ *ibid.*

young Jewish architects who were having difficulty finding work.²⁰ Oser formed a partnership with French émigré architect Jean Fombertaux in the 1960s that was highly successful; at its peak Oser & Fombertaux employed twelve draftsmen.

PROMINENT IN THE PRESS BUT ABSENT FROM THE HISTORIES

Despite their sustained success and continual presence in the press the firm Oser and Fombertaux are not mentioned in any history of modernist architecture in Australia. Competent practitioners of modernist architecture, like many of the migrant architects, they have slipped from view in the reflections of the growth of modernism in Sydney in the post war period.

Like Oser, Hungarian architect Hugo Stossel's projects were regularly featured in the architectural press and in populist publications like Sixty Beach and Holiday Homes.²¹ Hugo Stossel had emigrated in 1938 and was another architect, with considerable achievements overseas who was forced to prove his ability and sit further examinations to qualify for registration. In his 1946 application for registration the 42 year old included a list of his previous projects in Vienna and Budapest that included several large office blocks, a theatre seating 2000 that had been featured in several European and American Architectural magazines, a residence for the General Manager of the "Wagon Lits" company, also featured in two European Architectural magazines and the Soviet embassy in Bucharest.²²

After attaining registration Hugo Stossel practised successfully as a modernist architect in Sydney throughout the 1950s and 60s. In 1955 *Architecture in Australia* featured Stossel's "Economically Built Factory at Artarmon, NSW" for Webbing & Trimming Pty Ltd.²³ The factory was a prefabricated steel frame structure with saw tooth roof. The front elevation was broken into geometric forms by the use of concrete tiles and an upper band of glazing. The front doors were a deep red 'Formica' and the featured lettering red to match. Stossel designed an apartment block on a corner site in Onslow Avenue in Elizabeth Bay that was featured in *Building and Engineering* in May 1951.²⁴ The steel framed reinforced concrete structure with cavity brick curtain wall and floor to ceiling steel framed windows remains and is listed by the Australian Institute of Architects. H. Stossel & Associates was active throughout the 1960s, including contributing a scheme for the Sydney Opera House competition and the Rocks Redevelopment competition in 1963²⁵ and the firm remained prominent into the 1970s and 1980s.

²⁰ Teddy Quinton 'Post-War Modernism in Sydney: George Reves and Hans Peter Oser', unpublished thesis University NSW, 1997 p.87

²¹ Phyllis Shillito, Sixty Beach and Holiday Homes, Associated General Publications, Sydney Australia. 1954, other examples include *Building and Engineering*, May 24, 1951 p.91 and *Architecture in Australia*, October- December 1955, p.107

²² RAIA registration file, additional documents no longer in file and not able to be located.

²³ *Architecture in Australia*, October- December 1955, p.107

²⁴ *Building and Engineering*, May 24, 1951 p.91

²⁵ *Architecture in Australia*, June 1993 pp.52-72



'Neo Classic' house 1954 by H. Stossel, in Sixty Beach and Holiday Homes, p.85

THE IMPORTANCE OF MIGRANT CLIENTS

The frequency with which the clients of modernist architects were also migrants indicates that there was a particularly warm reception for modern design within this community. There are countless examples of the architects mentioned in this paper finding like minded clients who had also emigrated from Europe. It seems these clients often allowed the architects to better realise modernist designs.

One example of the success of this relationship is Dr. Henry Epstein's design for the Hillman House in Roseville. The Russian born Epstein had emigrated from Austria in 1939 after graduating with a Doctorate of Architecture from a university in Vienna. Chiam Hillman was a Polish immigrant tailor who had purchased a vacant block and in 1947 commissioned Epstein to design a house²⁶. Epstein was given a free reign and the result was a remarkable composition of white rectangular prisms broken by ribbon windows, sited on a steep block amongst Federation and 1920s bungalows. Epstein had a long career as a modern architect in Australia with projects that include an early high rise in St. Leonards, the extension to the Jewish Museum on Darlinghurst Road and a multi-storey office building on Macquarie Street, but the Hillman House can be seen as one of his most clearly Internationalist Style designs.²⁷

The Hillman House also offered Epstein the opportunity of collaborating with furniture maker Paul Kafka. The relationship between modernist architects and furniture makers was very important. The Hillman House clearly illustrates how the two professions worked together. Epstein designed an extensive range of built-in furniture for the house which Kafka carried out with extreme skill. Kafka's June 1950 invoice to the Hillmans records furniture for virtually every room of the house, including beds, wardrobes, bookshelves, a cocktail cabinet, table and chairs. His work blurred the distinction between furniture and architecture in that he also made the staircase, wall-panelling, windowsills, and a mantelpiece.²⁸

Paul Kafka was the son of a Viennese furniture maker who had trained and practised in Vienna before emigrating to Australia in 1939. He had established his own business in Waterloo not long after where he made custom made furniture employing between 20 and 30 tradesmen. His work furnished many of Sydney's modern homes in the period. Like the work of Schulim Krimper in Melbourne, Kafka's cabinet making was true craftsmanship and modern design that stood in

²⁶ Oral History on Hillman House, Historic Houses Trust archives, 1995.

²⁷ See Case Study of Epstein for a closer examination of his work.

²⁸ Historic Houses Trust, Hillman House file.

marked contrast to the mass produced furniture available in Australia in the 1940s and 1950s.²⁹ Kafka did a lot of work in the eastern suburbs of Sydney including the Frank Theeman House in Rose Bay designed by Hans Peter Oser, 85 Victoria Road designed by George Reves and 29c Winulla Road Pont Piper designed by Hugh Buhrich.³⁰ His own house at 11 Eton Road, Roseville was designed by Hugo Stossel in 1950. The house was geometric in form with white rendered exterior and flat roof. Internally it was highly textured with wood panelling, built in units, and heavy drapes. The house was featured in *Australian House and Garden*, May 1952. Kafka's wife was interviewed in 1981 and noted that many of Kafka's clients were Europeans who wished to maintain the same standard of craftsmanship in their furniture they had been accustomed to.³¹



Hillman House 1949 by Dr. Epstein. Photo Max Dupain

CONCLUSION

This architecture is 'un-loved' in that it is largely unknown, un-listed and generally absent from histories. Often not exemplary, sometimes not pretty, frequently using cheap materials and with restrictive budgets the individual buildings are at times perhaps not easy to love. Certainly many are hard to identify and have been modified or demolished. However it is important to acknowledge that there were a great many architects with authentic European modernist architectural training active within Sydney designing, commenting and contributing to the development of modern architecture in the post war period. This presence and their production is an important aspect of the history of Sydney, and one that requires greater understanding before the buildings of this period can be adequately identified, assessed and conserved.

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²⁹ Johnson, 1988, pp.85-86

³⁰ Powerhouse Museum, Kafka file.

³¹ Anne Watson, Powerhouse Museum, interview with Mrs. Hocking 1981.

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