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Woy Woy, 77 Marine Parade, Elwood



Woy Woy, 2002, my car outside.

Designed by the architect Geoffrey Mewton (b1905-) of Mewton and Grounds (1933-39) in 1935-36, Woy Woy is not only the earliest of the small group of Modernist flats in St Kilda, but also with the two-storied Cairo flats, 98 Nicholson Street, Fitzroy (also 1935-36) designed by 27-year old architect Best Overend (1909-77), of Taylor Soilleux and Overend, certainly the earliest in Melbourne and arguably, in Australia. Sydney flats tend to retain decorative elements of Moderne streamlining. But Woy Woy and Cairo are austere, daringly minimal, rendered plain, without ornament. Cairo combines touches of luxury with strictly

minimalist accommodation, or *existenzminimum*. It has 29 studio and one-bedroom apartments, some as small as 24 m². The design of Woy Woy is a composition of pure, pale and geometric forms. Both blocks have accessible roofs.

Grounds designed the houses:

- Ranelagh, 36 Rannoch Avenue, Mt Eliza (1933-35); Richard - I can find no trace nor record of this building, are you able to send more information on this one? - VG

- His own house, The Ship, 35 Rannoch Avenue, Mt Eliza (1934, VHR 1910, HO 216);

- Lyncroft, Tucks Road, Shoreham (1934);

- Betty Ramsay's house, 29 Rendlesham Avenue, Mt Eliza (1937-38, VHR H2181, HO 217);

and Mewton designed the Stooke House, Halifax Street, Brighton (1934).

These are the five earliest modernist buildings in Australia (all one or two levels), and arguably Woy Woy and Cairo are the two earliest multi-storied, Modernist buildings in Australia.

The only modestly decorative indulgence at Woy Woy is the name, jauntily applied in blocky relief letters, as if snatched from a Ginger Meggs comic strip in the *Sun News-Pictorial* and a small cream brick nib. The connection of their name with the coastal town north of Sydney is not known. At only three stories although it seems taller, Woy Woy is still today the tallest building along the waterfront, south of Edgewater Towers (43) and when built, Woy Woy was the tallest modernist building in Australia.

The interlocking cubic forms at Woy Woy reveal Mewton's interest in the works of Willem Marinus Dudok, whose best-known building is the Raadhuis at Hilversum, Netherlands (1928-31, 38), but Mewton avoids Dudok's decorative flashes. Mewton's design is also firmly in the slipstream of International Modernism, as if it were one bay of Mies van der Rohe's flats at his Weissenhof Siedlung estate, perched high above Stuttgart (1927).

A companion block was planned for the rear of Woy Woy to face Lytton Street, but it was never built. Relatively recent alterations at Woy Woy have unfortunately reduced its integrity, including that most windowsills have been lowered by 250 mm; only the ground floor window is original. Lowering cills is a frequently requested alteration to historic buildings, to increase light and views to current expectations, but it does degrade the carefully determined façade composition and proportion. And steel window frames at Woy Woy have been replaced with aluminium, again, to quite different effect. The front stairs have been extended to the roof, and the date, 1936 has been gratuitously insinuated onto the upper stair.

The construction system is unusual: floors are insulated with concrete between timber joists. For astoundingly, Woy Woy is not a reinforced concrete building as might be imagined, but brick, with timber-framed floors. But then neither is Gerrit Rietveld's Schroeder House, Utrecht (1921-24), also timber-framed with the appearance of concrete.

In the same year 1936, Mewton also designed Bellaire, 3 Cowderoy Street, St Kilda West. This is a large, three-storied block of so-called 'bachelor flats,' appearing as even more severe than Woy Woy, because of its bulk. Yet, mediated by Mewton's interest in Dudok, it is un-rendered with two tones of brick: cream decorative panels in the red walls. The accessible roof increases the available open space, but is cheerfully adorned with umbrellas and planting to dress-up its views over the bay.

Woy Woy's interiors are tightly planned, almost as minimally as Cairo, though I have not compared dimensions. The kitchenettes have inbuilt breakfast inglenooks, impressively advertised as 'American kitchens,' in fact every flat has a living room, a bedroom, an en-suite bathroom and a proper kitchen. But some planning is so tight as to be inconvenient: bedrooms are so wee as to be unusable, except by St Kilda's vertical sleepers, and the front door opens into the bedroom. Whether this was due to a too-clever architect, or more likely a greedy client, is unclear.

Yet even more than Woy Woy, Mewton's Bellaire looks towards post-war flat design, as the *Heritage Study's* authors perceptively note, for better or for worse; as if preceding the ubiquitous 1960s 'six-packs,'

flats of suburbs beyond St Kilda. Bellaire was sold in November 2007 by the family who have owned it for many decades and major redevelopment of the site is threatened to begin as soon as June 2008.

Geoffrey Mewton travelled overseas between July 1928 and 1932, studying recent architecture in Europe and America, as did successful commercial architects (such as Leighton Irwin and Marcus Barlow), other recent graduates (John Scarborough, Harry Winbush (31 & 38), Oscar Bayne, Best Overend (38) and Roy Grounds, 47) and as so many others of us have since. Mewton recalled that Dudok was the hero of every architectural student during his first years in Europe.

Mewton & Grounds: 1933-39 (Goad, *Encyclopedia*)

Mewton returned to join Roy **Burnam typo: should be Burman - VG** Grounds (1905-81), his exact contemporary, in partnership as Mewton and Grounds, from 1932-38. **Richard – first page of chapter you gave Mewton & Grounds date as 1933-36 - VG** As Professor Freeland observed, Mewton and Grounds ‘with their clean, pure and intensely warm buildings, set Melbourne architecture alight for a brief five years.’

In 1939 **Richard – another date for the end of the partnership? - VG**, Grounds went off alone, and Mewton joined Edward Billson (1892-1986, 38) as he was finishing his award-winning Warburton buildings. Billson was 13 years older than Mewton and had been articled to Walter Burley Griffin (1876-1937, 3, 28 & 38) as his first employee in Australia. And so the wheel turns, with so many spokes from St Kilda.

Until his retirement, Mewton then became a partner in the old established architectural firm of Godfrey and Spowers, which had been founded in 1895. It became Godfrey, Spowers, Hughes, Mewton and Lobb. Former employees such as Alex Njoo recall Mewton still coming to the office as an old man. The firm continues still, as Spowers Architects.

First with Mewton, then alone, Roy Grounds can claim more than any other architect, to have brought Modernism in architecture to Australia. His Modernism is plain, unpretentious, yet consistent: assembled from simple geometric, often interlocking forms.

Roy Burman Grounds (1905-81), graduated from the University of Melbourne Architecture Atelier. He was then articled to Blackett, Forster and Craig, who were conservative and classical, before travelling to the United States. In 1929 he worked first in New York, then in Los Angeles as a set designer for RKO Pictures and MGM Studios, before returning to Melbourne in 1932 and into partnership with Mewton. They were prolific designers, producing a series of at least 15 Modernist houses with open floor plans and flat roofs, responding to local conditions, which made the running for subsequent Modernist domestic design in Australia and 15 years before Harry Seidler’s first Modernist house in Sydney.

In 1935 the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects voted Mewton’s Stooke house and Grounds own house, The Ship, 35 Rannoch Avenue on the Ranelagh Estate, Mt Eliza to be the best house designs in Victoria in the twentieth century. Other early houses designed by Grounds within the partnership included the First Henty House, Portland Lodge, 1 Plummer Avenue, Frankston (1933-34), and Chateau Tahbilk at Nagambie. The Ship was designed by Grounds for himself and his family as early as 1933 and when completed described in the *Australian Home Beautiful* in 1934 as an ‘economical design, of prefabricated units, in modern materials, with largely built-in furniture.’ The Ship was an experimental transitional design, built as a cubic masses in a conventional asbestos cement-clad stud frame with serrated timber French doors, a rope balustrade, a Dudokian yellow and white striped, stable-split entrance door, between stepped brick panels. **Richard – there were several more houses (5 or 6 that I know of) designed by Grounds or Grounds & Mewton around Frankston and Mt Eliza in this period, all since demolished, I think they were all in the Californian Bay Region style and all holiday beach houses, as is the Betty Ramsay house - VG**

Then came a deluge of Modernist houses: the Watt House, Grosvenor Court, Toorak (1935, altered); and the Fairbairn House, 236 Kooyong Road, Toorak (1935-36); the Evan Price house, 2 Riverview Road, Essendon (1936), now accommodating the large requirements of the former Minister for Planning, the Honourable Justin Madden and his family; Ingpen House, Aphrasia Street, Newtown, Geelong (1936) and the Thomas House, 8 Reid Street, Balwyn (1937, demolished).

Finally in 1937, Grounds designed the Ramsay House at 29 Rendlesham Avenue, Mount Eliza, which neatly transmuted into the Grounds House, when Grounds married his client. During this period Grounds developed a domestic architectural style which clearly showed the influence of the contemporary Bay Region style of the west coast of the United States, particularly of William Wilson Wurster (1895-1973), whose work he had had direct experience of while working as a set designer in Los Angeles. With his mentor Bernard Maybeck, landscape architect Thomas Church and architect Joseph Esherick, Wurster designed hundreds of houses in California from 1920-50, using indigenous materials and a direct, simple style suited to the climate. His 1928 Gregory Farmhouse in Scotts Valley, California is regarded as the prototypical ranch-style house.

Then in 1937 Grounds retired from the practice and went off to live in France for a while. On his return, working alone over 1939-42, Grounds developed their approach at Woy Woy into his own manner, influentially recasting Australian flats design with sheer Modernism. All of these remarkable flats still exist: Clendon (1939-40) and Clendon Corner (1940-41) on Clendon Road, Toorak for smaller families and singles; 13-15 Clendon Road, Armadale; Moonbria, Mathoura Road, Toorak (1941) with glazed circular tower and circular lift and Quamby, 3 Glover Court, Toorak (1941-42).

Here Goad detects the influence of Scandinavian design and less obviously, of Raymond McGrath, one Australian architect who stayed in London and is known for his public building interiors and their fittings such as the BBC's Broadcasting House, Portland Place (1931), even designing clocks and door furniture and an engraved glass screen at the Royal Institute of British Architects (1932-4) which are described by Nikolaus Pevsner as 'daringly' modern.' Inexplicably, none of Grounds flats in this period is in St Kilda.

In 1953, Grounds joined Frederick Romberg (1910-92) and Robin Boyd (1919-71, 46) in another partnership and Grounds, Romberg and Boyd became the most important architectural firm in Melbourne, during 1953-62. Afterwards, Grounds devoted his last twenty years to the tortuous gestation of his National Gallery of Victoria and Cultural Centre (now the Victorian Arts Centre) as Roy Grounds & Co (1962-81).

Romberg's complex contribution to Melbourne's Modernism includes two remarkable flats, recipients of the baton passed from Woy Woy and Bellaire, in Queens Road, just outside the City of Port Phillip: Newburn, at no 30 (1939-42) and Stanhill at no 34 (1945-50).

There are only four other Modernist blocks of flats in this early period in St Kilda, leading up to World War II: 51 Ormond Esplanade, Elwood (1939) is J H Dorney's excursion into Modernism; a long stylistic trip only six years after Surrey Court (41); Acland Hill, 45 Acland Street (1939) by A W Plaisted (41); Burnett Lodge, 9-13 Burnett Street (c 1940) whose designer is unknown; and Park Court, 473 St Kilda Road (1938) evolved from from Mewton's Bellaire but with balconies, by the significant and innovative architects, Seabrooke and Fildes, who had just designed MacRobertson Girls High School, Albert Park (1933-34) the earliest government building in Victoria that is fully Dudokian and the earliest so near to Modernism.

It is interesting to compare these daringly Modernist works with the stylist Streamlined Moderne, more fashionable in Sydney. Fearful of stark modernism, your Moderne designer streamlines with round corners, corner windows, horizontal aerofoil stripes, nautical references and Art Deco decoration: whether stylised, prismatic, or geometric. The earliest Moderne in St Kilda is the Royal, Robe Street (1933), Archibald Ikin's most distinctive design; Boncap, 49 Fitzroy Street, by L Garrard Calin with shops on the ground floor in the European manner and with cantilevered balconies; Windemere, 49 Broadway, Elwood is finely detailed and the most vigorous and remarkable composition by J H Esmond Dorney (41); Del Marie, 4 St Leonards Avenue, by S W Hall; Taradale, 229 Brighton Road, by Walter Mason; and Valma, 17 Victoria Street by W H Merritt, were all built in 1936 and Devon Court, 45-47 Chapel Street by Alder and Lacey is from 1938.

By World War II, such was the floating flats population of St Kilda, that over two-thirds of all accommodation in St Kilda was rented and even more remarkably, 20-30% of all households had only lived where they were for a year.

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