Art Nouveau Exhibition

Milton House (detail)
21-25 Flinders Lane, Melbourne
Architects: Sydney Smith and Ogg (1901)
Art Nouveau Exhibition

Art Nouveau Architecture in Melbourne - Catalogue Introduction 7

Probably no other style in the history of Australian architecture has suffered so much from an identity crisis as that which is now referred to, rightly or wrongly, as Art Nouveau. L'Art Nouveau was in fact the preferred contemporary term and that was used, significantly, only by building decorators. As a stylistic identification, it is notable by its absence from architects' and builders' journals of the time.

L'Art Nouveau began appearing in Australia at the turn of the century, having taken "less time than most fashions on the trip from Europe."(1) Melbourne was its most enthusiastic supporter, although one of the earliest built examples of the type in Victoria occurred in Geelong in 1898 with Laird and Barlow's Friendly Societies Dispensary, 55 Ryrie Street. By 1905, The Australasian Decorator and Painter could observe that "the new style of ornament for architecture and house decoration ...seems to have come to stay."(2) Although it was considered anti­traditional, even reformist in intention, its contemporary relevance was seen as little more than "a fresh rendering of old motifs."(3) And indeed, the architectural evidence which remains today suggests that practitioners of the style were generally more concerned with revamping old decorative details than with translating the spirit of reform which impelled the original European Art Nouveau types.

In Europe, Art Nouveau had developed in reaction to the historical eclecticism of Victorian architecture. It was essentially an anti­historical movement opposed to "the tyranny of styles" (Voysey) and "the falsification of forms" (van de Velde). Its most notable architectural interpreters, for instance, Horta, Hankar and van de Velde in Belgium, Guimard in Paris, André in Nancy, Mackintosh in Glasgow and Gaudi in Barcelona, all pursued dynamic articulation and interaction of form and facade, where continuity of surface expressed the plastic body of the building, and where the character of materials was displayed, not disguised, and employed to determine form, construction and decoration. This pursuit of the original, or at least the non-historical, which was fed nonetheless by various historical influences (for example, the Arts and Crafts movement in Britain), produced an extraordinary variety of architectural effects and identities, from Style Moderne in France, to Style Liberty in Italy. The inspiration of Art Nouveau's forms, linear and stylized, was essentially Nature--floral and vegetable: what those forms were made to express was the architect's individual vision. While the historical architectural styles Art Nouveau attempted to overcome, influenced both its conceptions and expression, they were subsumed to revitalized decorative and formal parts which were integrated to the whole.

In Australia, the naturalistic aesthetic of Art Nouveau was deployed to depict native floral forms. These had already been applied to such "American Romanesque", if not picturesque, buildings as the old South Yarra Post Office (162 Toorak Road, by A. J. Macdonald, 1892-3) and the Victorian Artists' Society Building (430 Albert Street, East-Melbourne, by R. Speight, Jnr. and A. W. Tompkins, 1891). The results were eccentric but provided visual substantiation of current architectural thinking.
During the last two decades of the 19th century, architects such as Sulman, Dobbs, Hunt and Barnet had called for the creation of an Australian architecture. This sort of local consciousness was an expression of the general political climate preceding the constitution of the Australian Commonwealth in 1900. Art Nouveau's arrival in Australia, then, coincided with Federation, when nationalist sentiment was running high. Its attenuated, energetic forms encouraged a shift in local decoration to more stylishly conceived and abstracted representation. If indeed the spirit of reform, true to the original, did impel the Australian version of Art Nouveau, it had less to do with stylistic a-historicism than with the expression of local character and the pursuit of a national architecture. "Bad originality is preferable to good copyism" wrote W. Fulton in 1905, and it could be taken as a standard aesthetic of the time.

Nonetheless, Melbourne saw some remarkable imitations of the new European style. The now-demolished 45-47 Spring Street, Melbourne (Purchas and Teague, 1900) was positively Parisian in effect, with its moulded brickwork and Guimardian iron balustrades, which Robert Haddon's later adjoining block of flats at 41-43 Spring Street (1905) sympathetically repeated. The balustrade detailing of the Mayfair Theatre (167-173 Collins Street, Melbourne, by Nahum Barnet, 1913) and the Hotel London (97-103 Elizabeth Street, Melbourne, by Nahum Barnet, 1911) offers more sober versions of Brussels decorative iron-work, such as that on Solvay House (Brussels, by Victor Horta, 1895-1900). The balconies of the Simpson Street elevation of Eastbourne House (cnr. Simpson Street and Wellington Parade, East Melbourne, by Sydney Smith and Ogg, 1901) are singularly Gallic in upward thrust and peacock-tail linearity. The whimsical asymmetry of the building itself, particularly the Wellington Parade elevation, provides, along with Milton House (21-25 Flinders Lane, Melbourne, by Sydney Smith and Ogg, 1901), Melbourne's most sophisticated translation of the essential spirit of Continental Art Nouveau. In both cases, the structural parts have become decorative forms incorporated into the body of the building. After 1910, the Smith, Ogg and Serpell hotels, such as the Bendigo (125-127 Johnston Street, Collingwood, 1911) and the Kilkenny Inn (cnr. King and Lonsdale Streets, Melbourne, 1913), provided distinctive conceptual interpretations of the style.

But, for the most part, L'Art Nouveau coiled, spilled and writhed its way across friezes, around capitals and into architraves, and generally filled up unforgiving spaces with motifs that stoutly proclaimed their milieu and their heritage. Such buildings as the Patou Buildings, (115-117 Elizabeth Street, Melbourne, probably by Nahum Barnet, 1905), the Friendly Societies (55-57 Elizabeth Street, Melbourne, by Nahum Barnet, 1902) and the Tomasetti (277-279 Flinders Lane, Melbourne, 1853, with alterations to facade, c. 1901), along with the State Savings Bank (214 Swan Street, Richmond South, by Billing, Son & Peck, 1907) veer between the freakish and the fantastic.

For an achieved balance of personal fancy and functional simplicity, the distinctive designs of Robert Haddon remain exceptional. Haddon came to Melbourne in 1900 and proved to be, along with Smith, Ogg and Serpell, the most sustained and sympathetic interpreter of the style.
His highly individualized accounts of the Art Nouveau idiom projected an understanding of the style's innovatory principles which transcended the restricted cosmetic approach of other architects. As an architectural consultant, Haddon prepared drawings and designs for other members of his profession. His influence was therefore pervasive and is unmistakeable on buildings that are not even directly associated with his name. The Bank of New South Wales (502-4 Flinders Street, Melbourne, by W.S.P. Godfrey, 1911-12) is one such building and he apparently worked for Sydney Smith and Ogg. Haddon's technical manual of 1908, entitled Australian Architecture, reveals his concern to evolve "a national architecture" from the wide selection of historical styles which were "little suited to the requirements of Australian practice." (6) Only by treating the building "in what may be defined as a naturalistic manner" could "true development (of) a national architecture" take place.

Be that as it may, there is only irregular evidence that the innovatory design principles of Art Nouveau played a part in the basic composition of Melbourne buildings. Although the style fostered a new decorative language, it had, in general, little more than surface effect on local architecture. Its forms, always sturdier than the original European varieties, were utilized principally to enhance traditional or revivalist structural forms, whether around the classical features of commercial buildings or in the wooden fretwork of "Federation Style" suburban houses. Nevertheless, with its adaptation of native floral forms (principally gumnuts, gumleaves and waratahs) the style provided an Australian flavour to some of the city's most interesting buildings, and its adoption by local architects represented, on occasion, a genuine attempt to evolve a distinctively national architecture.

Jenepher Duncan
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NOTES

3. Ibid.
4. See, for example, an article by Nahum Barnet, "Climatic Architecture", Victorian Review, VII, 1882.
6. Robert Haddon, Australian Architecture. Melbourne, 1908, p. 37
7. The foregoing was an introduction to a catalogue published with the opening of an exhibition of Art Nouveau Architecture in Melbourne (photographs), at Monash University August 5-27, 1980.
Art Nouveau Exhibition

Hastbourne House
62 Wellington Prde.
East Melbourne
Architects:
Sydney Smith and Ogg
1901
The appellation 'Art Nouveau' has been applied to the familiar twisting and writhing decorative layers often seen in bas-relief gripping at spandrel panels and prowling over parapets and cappings. It has also been applied to the architectural forms which twine in a similar manner not as decoration but as integral structural legs for a building.

The latter phenomenon is said to have risen from Viollet-le-Duc's structural theories and incited architects such as Gaudi at Guell park, Barcelona; Guimard in the Humbert de Romans auditorium in Paris (1897), and his Maison Coilliot at Lille (1898), to shape the stress lines to follow a structure which followed no form of trabeation or arcuation which had gone before. Horta was the first to achieve this in 1893 at 12 Rue de Turin, Brussels.

Architectural historians have, in Britain, placed any occurring Art Nouveau decorative layer on a separate and subsidiary plane to the basic building carcass. The buildings, (such as those shown at the Art Nouveau exhibition at Monash), have been dubbed as part of the new 'Free Style' which was, itself, a mode of design which may or may not have been eclectic in detail but was fundamentally a free composition of building volumes and shapes. Architects, active in the Free Style such as Norman Shaw, expressed their dislike for Art Nouveau as an art form, let alone its embodiment in building form. Similarly proponents of the Arts and Crafts Movement such as C. R. Ashbee were openly critical of this new fashion.

We have a miniature Norman Shaw New Scotland Yard (1887-90) in the Bendigo Hotel, 125-7 Johnston St. Collingwood, Sydney Smith Ogg and Serpell, (1911 - )6, with its twin tourelles, its single broad-gabled centre-bay, and its Scottish Baronial ancestry. The ox-bow entrance hood and the style of the hotel written a top, provide the hint of Art Nouveau, together with the foliation under the eaves of each tourelle.

Perhaps the Kilkenny Inn, 250 King Street, Sydney Smith Ogg and Serpell, 1913 7, provides the most plastic use of conventional materials of the group exhibited. Within the 3/4 circle corner-tower is embodied most of the Art Nouveau in this building. The tapering, rib-like columns, the wrought-iron scrolls to the balustrading at the 2nd floor and the flared skirt of the First Level balustrade provide us with a rare piece of Art Nouveau architecture where the structural elements of the building are managed in a way to suggest Art Nouveau influences. At Eastbourne House, 62 Wellington Parade, East Melbourne, 1901-02 8, the Wellington Parade elevation shares with Milton House, 25 Flinders Lane, Sydney Smith and Ogg, 1901 9, a series of visual puns which involve windows becoming both flowers and flower pots, and innocent Medieval elements are disposed irreverently for the sake of a two dimensional, asymmetrical composition as in a drawing.

In both cases, these elements are not basic parties to the structure of either building, although they are massive, three-dimensional items, particularly at Wellington Parade, (i.e., the expression of a chimney shaft corbelled out from the wall).
This informality must be termed as part of the new Free Style and in application of the term Art Nouveau, confines it to the terracotta friezework used on the Wellington Parade and Flinders Lane facades and the scrolled wrought-iron which confines balconies and fills fanlights.

What then was little more than a visually decorative style has been effectively exhibited at Monash, using large black and white photographs as the medium. The catalogue provided is both informative and decorative, within itself. The phallic centre-facade element of Milton House is blown up to fill one side, whilst the building list of 44 and five photographs appear on the other.

The few deficiencies in this publication are that there are not more photographs (if not all), from the exhibition itself to take away as a record, and that some of the listings are in error viz Beaufort House, 55-7 William Street, not King Street for which the Architect was R.B. Hamilton and the date c193210. The Paton Building was designed by Barnet in 1905. Elsewhere small anomalies in dates occur, such as the Auditorium, (now the Mayfair), was built during 1912, not 1913, the alterations occurring in 1934 - ironically Nigel Lewis, in his thesis on Barnet (1974),11 cites the Auditorium as a move away from Art Nouveau motifs.

The Flinders Street Railway competition was held in 1899 and construction commenced in 1901 - H.P.C. Ashworth was an engineer, he was not an architect.12 Of the unknowns in the City of Melbourne, some research into Building Permit Application Registers would have yielded results which would have made the exhibition that much more informative.

We look forward to future architectural exhibitions at Monash and hopefully elsewhere specifically at the National Gallery which really should have a permanent exhibition of material similar to that at the Monash exhibition, or perhaps that of the R.A.I.A. (Victorian Chapter), Library of Works.

GRAEME BUTLER

Kilkenny Inn,
250 King St.
Melbourne
Architects:
Sydney Smith Ogg and Serpell, 1913
Notes:


3. A Service, op cit

4. E. N. Shaw, letter to Mother Etheldreda, 25.7.1904


11. N. Lewis, Narhum Barnet, (Melbourne University undergraduate Investigation Program, 1974).

12. Flinders Street Railway Station, A report from the G.B.A.C. to the Minister of Public Works.

Milton House
(Detail)