Editorial
(Un)loved Modern 1

Scott Robertson, Guest Editor¹
The catalyst for the Australia ICOMOS (Un)loved Modern conference in Sydney in 2009 was the ever lengthening list of important mid-century, and later, modern buildings that were being demolished without consideration of the significance of the buildings to the development of Australian architecture, the importance such buildings still had in the lives of the Australian public and the question of how sustainable the demolition of such recent buildings could be.

The loss included buildings such as the NSW State Office Block, Sydney (NSW Government Architect 1964, demolished 1997), the Cameron Offices, Belconnen (John Andrews International 1977, majority demolished 2008) the façade and plaza destruction of the King George Tower (John Andrews International 1976, altered 1999) and the imminent demolition of the Sydney Water Board Building (McConnell, Smith & Johnson, 1965), the Sydney Entertainment Centre (Edwards, Madigan, Torzillo & Briggs, 1983), the Sydney Exhibition Centre (Phillip Cox, Richardson & Partners, 1988), the Sydney Convention Centre (John Andrews International, 1988) (all three in Darling Harbour, Sydney), Fire & Emergency Services Authority building, Perth (Cameron, Chisholm & Nichol, 1979), and the Tasmanian State Office Block, Hobart (Hartley, Wilson & Partners, 1969).

The concept of a National patrimony (or National Estate) does not have deep roots in Australia and yet most of the buildings listed above that have been demolished or are under threat were commissioned by Australian governments to express a sense of public purpose and public service. In common with many governments around the world, the driving forces of the economy are now economic rationalism and the withdrawal of the public sector from undertaking public works unless it is in association with the private sector. Darling Harbour in Sydney is to be sacrificed so that the redevelopment of the public exhibition, conference and entertainment facilities and public space can be funded primarily by the private sector. Twenty-five year old, award-winning buildings and public spaces over a huge area are to be replaced by new privately-funded facilities that were required by the commissioning government authority (Infrastructure NSW) to not be of an excellent level of design.

Sydney Masonic Centre provided the suitably robust venue of exposed concrete and timber for the (Un)loved Modern conference which explored the issues of conserving Modern Movement architecture of the twentieth century. Over forty speakers examined the conference sub-themes of the love/hate attitudes to Modernism and the societal, political and technical problems of conserving the buildings that have framed our city environments since the 1930s.

In this first issue of papers emanating from the (Un)loved Modern conference Philip Goad provides the thematic overview for both the conference and the two issues of Historic Environment devoted to the dilemmas confronting the heritage community in conserving our twentieth century Modernist heritage. Goad analyses the problem of public and professional acceptance of Modern architecture in categorising Modern buildings as the difficult type, the difficult idiom, the difficult comparison and the difficult house and proposes means by which these difficulties can be overcome.
Leo Schmidt illustrates the destruction of Modern buildings in Germany and their replacement with pseudo-Medieval or Baroque buildings to “reinstate” lost townscape. He follows the cycle of destruction of the original ancient buildings due to conflict, the construction of the post-war Modern buildings expressing the hopes of a new, free, non-fascist future, and to the nostalgic present, reconstructed lost Medieval street- and townscape. This he attributes, not to a hatred of Modern architecture as such, but to a desire to retreat from a disquieting modern, globalised age.

Anke Kuhrmann continues Leo Schmidt’s depressing depiction of modern Germany with a detailed case study of the demolition of the former German Democratic Republic’s “Palace of the Republic” in the former East Berlin. She argues the heritage significance of the building was not considered, the use of asbestos contamination was used as an excuse for demolition, and the real reason for its demolition was a re-writing of the political history of the new, unified Germany.

On the other hand, Jacqueline Hucker’s paper on the Canadian World War 1 Memorial at Vimy Ridge in France highlights the respect and reverence accorded to a twentieth century structure that is imbued with symbolic significance for the nation. She highlights the painstaking efforts taken to arrest the decay of the monument and to rebuild parts of it to an almost as-new state as an ongoing, ever-renewing symbol of national sacrifice and unity. The memorial’s conservation involved the reproduction of some original details and also the introduction of new details to correct defects in the original detailing.

In writing of her involvement with the conservation works at Frank Lloyd Wright’s Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, Pamela Jerome sets out the theoretical framework within which the technical aspects of the conservation works were sited. Because of the young age of many of our Modernist icons, there is not yet a sufficient body of case studies from which to draw conclusions concerning the most appropriate approaches and methods for conserving such buildings. She highlights the controversy facing the choice of exterior finish and colour as but one example of the equally valid but diametrically opposed positions possible within accepted conservation criteria such as those established by the Venice Charter.

Anna Ely and Peter Raisbeck return to the core issues of (Un)loved Modernism with their paper on the Harold Holt Memorial Swimming Pool in Victoria. The pool building and complex is not only an ironic memorial to an Australian Prime Minister who drowned but is also a testament to the effect that changing societal expectations and functional programs are having on buildings that are designed tightly around a fixed and limited original brief. In addition they discuss the lack of understanding that later architects appeared to have concerning the original architectural intent of the functionalist pool building and its setting. The Harold Holt Memorial Pool saga is a case study that is the essence of the lack of appreciation of the recent, (un)loved past and of the mentality that permeates government at all levels; that of demolition and new build being seen as a symbol of economic progress rather than an act of cultural amnesia.

Finally, I would like to publicly acknowledge that the conference would not have been possible without the tireless work of the Organising Committee: Ian Kelly (chair), Vanessa Holtham, Anita Krivickas, Amy Nhan, Scott Robertson, David West, and Alison Manning and Hayley Milner from Conexion Event Management; and the Program Committee: Scott Robertson (chair), Geoff Ashley, Sheridan Burke, Caroline Butler-Bowdon, Louise Cox, Alan Croker, Jacqui Goddard, Anne Higham, Vanessa Holtham, Elisha Long, Peter McKenzie, Robert Moore, Amy Nhan, Judith O’Callaghan, George Phillips, Bruce Pettman, Peter Romey, Tim Smith, Anne Watson, and David West.
Endnotes

1 Dr Scott Robertson was also appointed as Chairman of 2009 Conference Program Committee for (Un)loved Modern

2 The Sydney Masonic Centre was designed by Joseland & Gilling in 1973 and the podium, containing the assembly rooms and conference facilities, was completed in 1979. The office tower was designed (using the Joseland & Gilling original design as a template) by PTW Architects and was constructed in 2002-2004

Photo on page 4: Foyer of the Sydney Masonic Centre.
(source: Max Dupain collection, courtesy Australian Institute of Architects, NSW Chapter)