Migrant architects practising modern architecture in Sydney, 1930-1960

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Abstract

This paper outlines the European émigré architectural community in Sydney from 1945-1965, its experiences, and the difficulties it encountered. This community included university teachers such as George Molnar, commentators such as Eva Buhrich and furniture designers such as Paul Kafka. Within this context the paper focuses on the work of a number of architects including; Hugh Buhrich, Dr. Heinrich Epstein, and Hans Peter Oser to illustrate the modernist architecture produced and to highlight the challenges and opportunities the émigré architects of the period faced. The architecture of this group can be seen as ‘unloved heritage’ in that very few examples are heritage-listed and almost none of its practitioners are included in Australia’s architectural histories. The paper seeks to redress the omission of this group from the Australian architectural histories and highlight the wide variety of European modernism applied in Australia by the large numbers of lesser known émigré architects.

Introduction

The growing awareness of twentieth century heritage has lead 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 number of refugees who arrived in Australia prior to the outbreak of World War 2 was small. Only 8,000 were admitted, yet their impact on the cultural life of Australia was considerable. Among these émigrés were architects who had studied modern architecture at university level in Europe, often with leading figures in the movement as their teachers. Many abandoned promising careers and thriving practices to flee the rise of Nazism.

International discussions of the history of mid-twentieth century European émigré architects have focused on the influence and success of Bauhaus architects in the US and, to a lesser extent, the UK. Australian architectural histories produced in the 1970s and 1980s generally do not. Donald Leslie Johnson (1980:86) notes 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.

The presence of migrants producing modernist architecture is noted, however the story of their contribution is that of dominant single personalities working outside the norm, such as 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 (1968) only refers to Romberg and Seidler. Johnson 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 (1952) refers to Romberg and Seidler and briefly mentions Fritz Janeba and, in The Australian Ugliness (1960), mentions Seidler and Czechoslovakian émigré architect Ernest Milston. Despite these brief mentions the majority of migrant architects and the stories of their careers are not contained in these histories. Importantly, there is also no mention of 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 Australia in the post-war period, including the work of migrant architects. The 1993 “émigré edition” of Art and Australia and the National Gallery of Australia’s 1997 exhibition and book The Europeans: Émigré Artists in Australia 1930-1960 (Butler 1997) 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 Victoria (Edquist 1993, 2000), yet there has been no equivalent work focusing on the architecture of migrants in Sydney in the period. 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-arrived 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” (Molnar nd). However even if citizenship was obtained, like the Royal Institute of British Architects, the NSW Board would not recognise qualifications from foreign schools of architecture (Molnar nd). Although some could sit further examinations to gain registration, those who were refused were left with limited options.

Similarly the outbreak of World War 2 in 1939 closed most architectural offices. For many migrant architects, a job in the NSW Public Works Department or similar government office offered secure employment. Most architects (migrant or otherwise) spent the war years anonymously designing structures for the war effort, if they were not assigned roles as manual labourers doing factory work (such as both Hugh Buhrich and Henry Epstein).

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 1968 (Silvan & Kubickova 2002). 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 designed, amongst other buildings, three villas in Bratislava and Dolny Kubin, five blocks of flats in Trencin, three school buildings (figure 1) 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 Slovakia and he has recently been the subject of a monograph published in Slovakia (Silvan & Kubickova 2002). Silvan died in Sydney in 1983, unknown in the local architecture community. As bright, and once successful, members of the Jewish middle class, the Silvans’ marginalised position in Australia must have been frustrating.
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, a member of CIAM who had collaborated with Le Corbusier on designs for the Weissenhof Seidlung. Buhrich is perhaps the only architect to work in Australia who had had direct experience of expressionist modernist teachings. Yet, while Buhrich was practising 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 at 315 Edinburgh Road, Castlecrag was halted in 1941 due to war-time restrictions on construction (SMH 24 June 1941). 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 (the Amos residence, Bayview) was completed. It was featured on one of the first covers of Australian House and Garden magazine (January 1949). 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 houses (Myers 1991; Torre 1997).

The contribution of his wife, Eva Buhrich is also beginning to be appreciated. Although she never registered or practised 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 (Hanna & Willis 2001:68). Her designs also occasionally appeared 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 (Hanna & Willis 2001:97). Her only book, a populist self-help text on outdoor living space, was published in 1973 (Buhrich 1973).

**Activating networks**

Despite the many hurdles presented to migrant architects, 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 Scotland (Lipson 1992). 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 Australia (Lipson 1992).

Lipson perhaps represents the previous generation of migrant architects who, whilst interested
in Bauhaus principals, were rather more influenced by the Dutch modern architecture of
Dudok.3 Initially employed in the Commonwealth 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 Buhrichs had applied for jobs with Lipson and Kaad but were unsuccessful
due to their poor knowledge of Australian building regulations (Gordon 1991). 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 for migrant architects as well as education as to Australian construction techniques
and specialised knowledge required to practise, 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 Balint, both of whom
had graduated from the Technical University of Budapest.4 Molnar taught design at Sydney
University for many years before becoming Professor of Architecture at the University of New
South Wales. Balint 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” (Lipson 1992). 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 2. Lipson also notes that like-minded architects and
artists would gather to discuss modern architecture in the Sydney cafes operated by migrants
to emulate European examples. Repin’s Café was one notable example and was established
by Russian migrant, Ivan Dmitrievitch Repin who not only ran a chain of Repin’s Cafes but also
imported coffee. The Repin’s Cafe in King Street was noted as having “a touch of Europe about
it largely because it was frequented by European-style, coffee-loving intellectuals” (Bersten
2002).

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 John D. Moore, Walter Bunning
and Sydney University’s, Professor Alfred Hook. Similarly, later in his career, Oser was known for
taking on young Jewish architects who were having difficulty finding work (Quinton 1997:87).
Oser formed a partnership with French émigré architect, Jean Fomberteaux, in the 1960s that
was highly successful and, at its peak, Oser & Fomberteaux 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
Fomberteaux is 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 populist publications such as *Sixty Beach and Holiday Homes* (Shillito 1954) as well as professional journals such as *Building and Engineering*, and *Architecture in Australia* (Stossel 1951, 1955). 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 2,000 that had been featured in several European and American Architectural magazines, a residence for the General Manager of the “Wagon Lits” company that had also featured in two European architectural magazines and the Soviet embassy in Bucharest (Stossel registration file).

After registration, Hugo Stossel practised successfully as a modernist architect in Sydney throughout the 1950s and 60s (figure 2). In 1955, *Architecture in Australia* featured Stossel’s “Economically Built Factory at Artarmon, NSW” for Webbing & Trimming Pty Ltd (Stossel 1955). 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 (Stossel 1951). The steel framed reinforced concrete structure with cavity brick, and a curtain wall of 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 unsuccessful schemes for the Sydney Opera House competition and the Rocks Redevelopment competition in 1963 (Stossel 1993), and the firm remained prominent into the 1970s and 1980s.
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 at 40 Findlay Avenue, Roseville (figure 3). The Russian-born Epstein had emigrated from Austria in 1939 after studying in Vienna and graduating with a Doctorate of Architecture. Chaime Hillman was a Polish immigrant tailor who had purchased a vacant block in Roseville and in 1947 commissioned Epstein to design a house (HHT 1995). Epstein was given free rein 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 short career as a modern architect in Australia (dying at the age of 59) but he completed numerous projects including the high rise North Shore Medical Centre (1956-59), the Jewish Macabean Hall on Darlinghurst Road (1960-66) and a multi-storey office building on Macquarie Street, but the Hillman House can be seen as one of his most clearly expressed and intact, surviving Modernist buildings.

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 (HHT Hillman House file).

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 marked contrast to the mass produced furniture available in Australia in the 1940s and 1950s (Johnson 1988:85-86). 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, Bellevue Hill designed by George Reeves and 29c Winulla Road, Point Piper designed by Hugh Buhrich (Kafka file). His own house at 11 Eton Road, Roseville was designed by Hugo Stossel in 1950 (figure 4 & 5). 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 to which they had been accustomed (Watson 1981).

**Conclusion**

This architecture is ‘un-loved’ in that it is largely unknown, un-listed and has previously been absent from histories. Certainly many of the works of migrant architects 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. Their presence and production is an important aspect of the history of Sydney, and one that requires greater understanding so that the buildings of this period can be identified, assessed and conserved.

**References**


Historic Houses Trust of NSW, Hillman House file.


Kafka file, Powerhouse Museum, Sydney.


Molnar, G. nd, Registration papers at the NSW Architects Registration Board.


Stossel registration file, RAIA. Additional documents no longer in file and not able to be located.


Endnotes

1 Anne Watson, formerly a curator at the Powerhouse Museum, has undertaken a study of migrant furniture makers in Sydney in the period.

2 A job in the NSW PWD was highly sought after in the period and the department pursued the introduction of many modern architectural ideas (Jack 1980).

3 Dudok’s influence is considerable in Australian modern architecture, but has not been studied in detail.

4 Balint’s application for Australian citizenship in 1944 lists him as born at Mohacs (Hungary), and resident of Australia for over five years (Argus, 21 March, 1944).

5 Editor’s note: Most of this built-in joinery was removed by one of the house’s later owners despite the heritage listing of the house including its interior fittings. Subsequent Land & Environment Court cases have ensured the entry hall seat, cupboard and mirror have been retained.