ONTARIO

French Renaissance Palace in Caulfield

Preamble

The mansion, Ontario, was the former house of Judge R.A. Billing, extended to its present form in 1889 for the Cobb & Co. coaching magnate, Alexander Robertson.

Ontario was comprised of thirty five rooms and perched on 7 hectares of land, at the corner of Orrong and Balaclava Roads, Caulfield, Victoria.

It was advertised in 1910 (Argus, June 25) as a

...Palatial Residence, Architecturally Perfect, and set in Beautiful Grounds. The building has been erected REGARDLESS OF COST, inside and outside. The doors and architraves are of polished mahogany; the floors of the main rooms are of beautiful parqette work... and ... The drawing room is an ARTISTIC TRIUMPH.

Many superlatives followed.

The Architect, J.A.B. Koch's lavish design epitomised Robertson's success in its decorative richness and, by its appellation, his origin.

Born at sea, somewhere between Scotland and Canada, he was to eventually seek gold in Victoria during the 1850's. He operated a number of carrying and coaching businesses, including Cobb & Co., until his progression into pastoral pursuits, pastoral companies and the Mount Morgan Mine. He died at Ontario in 1896 and his family sold the property to a gentleman by name of John B Watson, some nine years later. Watson was to name his new property Labassa.

Ontario: viewed from the south-east
(Building and Engineering Journal, 4.5.1901 pp 132-3)
Another change of ownership in the early 1920's meant the beginning of the property's degradation. Extensive subdivision followed and worse, in 1929, an intrusive block of flats was built, close by, at the mansion's north-east corner. The subdivision meant the alienation of the tennis courts, the gardens, glasshouses and stables, and a final blow came when, some years later, a cream-coloured act of criminality, was constructed hard against Ontario's remaining unfettered facade.

Hopefully, Ontario has now been saved by its recent acquisition by the National Trust of Australia (Victoria). Dr Miles Lewis has prepared the following article describing 'Ontario' and its derivations.

Acknowledgements: C. Kellaway, National Trust of Australia (Vic.) File No. 583, Research Notes 24.11.1978.

Note: The National Trust of Australia (Victoria) has launched an appeal for Ontario to aid its restoration and establishment as a Decorative Arts Museum.

Estimates cite $500,000 as the sum required for this undertaking. Any assistance should be directed to The Trust, Labassa Appeal, 4 Parliament Pl., Melbourne, 3002.

We acknowledge the use of The Trust's photographs in this publication.

ONTARIO (LABASSA), Manor Grove, Caulfield

Ontario stands out amongst surviving Victorian mansions not only because of the richness of its finishes, but also because of its Contintental sources of inspiration. The house shows no sign of the English influences common in other examples (Norman Shaw, W.E. Nesfield, William Morris and the Arts & Crafts Movement). The overall form, with an L-shaped verandah and balcony closed on each facade by a projecting window bay, is one common in Australia and to some extent the United States, but not in Britain or the Continent. It is in the points of detail that specific European connections can be adduced.

The exterior of the house would seem to relate principally to the French Renaissance as seen through German eyes— that is, not merely the eyes of the architect J.A.B. Koch but of the German architects practising in this manner, upon whom he drew. In J.G. Poppe's Villa Knoop at Bremen (1873-6) which purported to be of French Renaissance design, the Porte-cochère used caryatids of console form to support the arches, and these are copied in the verandah bay leading to the entrance of Ontario. Other much less specific details are common to the buildings; the swagged Corinthian columns which Koch uses at ground floor level on his southern hemicycle and Poppe uses in the upper level of his east elevation; the balustraded parapet; and the dormer window composition with a broken segmental pediment at the Villa Knoop which is broadly similar to Koch's pedimental composition above the east bay of Ontario.

The Villa Knoop was published in Hugo Licht's Architektur Deutschlands, with which Koch would have been familiar, and other examples in the same work have steep-roofed towers even more similar to that of Ontario than the tower of the Villa Knoop.
For his most conspicuous feature, the hemicycle with a roof of a truncated cone shape, Koch appears to have bypassed Licht and other German sources and gone direct to Paris where J.B. Bullet de Chamblain had used the truncated cone to roof the centrepiece of the garden front of Chaumont in 1703-7, and where a similar effect was subsequently achieved in the dome and superstructure of F.J. Belanger's Bagatelle of 1777.

The other component of Koch's design is Hellenism, as in the upper window hoods with the acroteria, and again a small number of related examples can be found in Licht, which reflects the interest in Greece, and in particular the excavations of the Germans in Asia Minor, which was sustained in Germany after fading elsewhere. The giant helmed head of Koch's east pediment might be traced to similar origins, but in this case there are local connections in the great masks leaning out from F.W. Prell's three office buildings in Queen Street (now demolished), designed by Koch's former employer, F.H. White. The other aspects of note on the exterior are the storks (now gone) which capped the corners of the buildings, and the very large amount of pink artificial marble (probably in Keene's Cement) used in the panels below the windows, in the panelled faces of piers, and on the columns themselves. A similar material can be found in the panels of the piers at 313-315 Drummond Street, Carlton (painted out), and in the fence piers of Auld Reekie, 511 Royal Parade, Parkville.
Internally, a greater range of sources has been drawn upon, although the wallpapers are sometimes not very specifically related to the principal theme of each room. The hall seems to attempt a Classical atmosphere, in the doorcases and in the ceiling, with its arabesques and its three-dimensional architectural treatment of two more or less Palladian motifs. All of this is Pompeian, though the arabesques perhaps owe something to Renaissance sources like Du Cerceau and Berain, and the naturalistic faces at the corners are intrusive. The embossed wallpaper is pleasing, but irrelevant to the theme of the room.

The Drawing Room or Ballroom is panelled in the French Rococo manner, perhaps of Verberckt, with a chimneypiece tending towards Meissonier. The adjoining ante-room repeats the chimneypiece and has a ceiling which, though too architectural, incorporates two rocaille panels: the lightly panelled dado and the all-over paper are again inappropriate to the theme, though the swirling asymmetrical floral motifs of the latter are arguably Rococo in spirit.

The south-eastern room is not specific in theme, though the suggestion of a geometrically panelled ceiling, and the brown tones, are not inconsistent in broad terms with the Elizabethan-Jacobean English work, and the wooden Renaissance-Mannerist chimneypiece fails only because it is so spindly in proportion. What is thought to have been the Billiards Room to the north-east is of a not dissimilar character, though more formally treated with a fully coffered ceiling and a window bay opening between two Corinthian columns with acanthus belts and swags of fruit at the top. It contains more explicitly Renaissance elements in the painted and stencilled work.

The Breakfast Room is perhaps the most original scheme of all. The bay window opens through a semi-elliptical arch carried on pairs of freestanding Corinthian columns which are ornamented with vines, picked out in green, climbing spirally around the shafts. The cornice contains a three-dimensional oak leaf frieze, using rather lurid blues and blue-greens, and the ceiling is in light shades, conceived as being matutinal in character, and includes a striking light blue for the mock three-dimensional borders of the central panel. All the borders are shaded consistent with light falling from the east window, and the outer panels contain rinceaux and arabesques, with two panels and two cartouches containing marine scenes. These bring to mind the scenes in the drawing room of Mintaro, Monegeetta, and suggest that the same decorator, Brettschneider, may have been responsible for each.

It remains to mention the rather grand divided staircase, and the stained glass. The great tripartite window opening onto the stair has an unusual white, red and yellow theme, with the central panel carrying four roundels, each with a child engaged in activities representative of one of the seasons. The glazing of the entrance is even more unusual in that it is of a striking geometric pattern with a strong theme of light blue, and that it extends not just to the sidelights and the arched transom lights, but to the upper panels of the door itself and the side spandrels remaining outside the fanlight.
The Breakfast Room,
window bay
If anything can be said that applies to all the diverse aspects of this house, it is that the whole is highly original, carefully conceived, and lavishly implemented, with effects ranging from highly pleasing at best, to at least stunning at worst - and, again, that it draws upon almost every source other than the fashionable English practice which pervaded in the colony at that time.

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