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Wimmera 11 Wimmera Place, St Kilda

An enthralling and revelatory book could be written from stories of the experiences of apartment-dwellers in St Kilda, behind closed doors. However, much can be seen from the street. St Kilda is a living thesaurus of architectural styles and design innovation, continuing to the present. Within the constraints of one single architectural style, diversity is no more visible than that that emerged after the Great War, in the Arts-and-Crafts manner. Oddly, in his otherwise excellent *Trust News* article, 'Significant Flats in St Kilda', Rohan Storey hardly refers to this, the largest group of flats.



Wimmera, 2004

Before World War I, the earliest flats in Melbourne were mostly in St Kilda, and in the Edwardian style: The Majestic, 153 Fitzroy Street (1912), The Canterbury, (1914, **21**), and slightly later, The Rand, 29 Marine Parade (1917) and The Langham at 95 Grey Street (1919). Both the Langham and the Rand are in an architectural manner transitional between Edwardian and Freestyle.

The Arts-and-Crafts architectural style arose from the local interpretation of a widely influential late-nineteenth century English movement that sought to re-establish skills of craftsmanship in building materials threatened by mass production and industrialisation. It derived from the ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78) who felt that everybody should have manual skills. It was most widely developed and promoted in England, but also in

Europe and the United States, by John Ruskin (1819-1900) the art theorist who influenced William Morris (1834-96), the most important entrepreneur and reviver of craft skills, which had been lost since machine production of products became universal in England in the early nineteenth century.

In Australia, no better exemplified than in St Kilda flats, the Arts-and-Crafts was combined with the influence of other European and American movements about 1900 or slightly earlier, such as Art Nouveau, Asian, early Modernism and American Bungalow styles, in a diversely eclectic mix and in an asymmetrical massing of formal composition.

Arts-and-Crafts flats were built in St Kilda for only ten years from 1917-27, but although there was very little building during the Great War, at least one block was built in each of the war years (1914-18) and surprisingly, three interesting blocks were built in 1917. The work of several significant firms contributed, including Howard R. Lawson, Robert Haddon, Rodney Alsop and Christopher A. Cowper. There are about twenty-two significant designs in this period and no two are really similar: more occur than in any other style.

One of the plainest of these designs is Wimmera flats, at 11 Wimmera Place, one of those built during the war in 1917.

They were designed by architect Howard R. Lawson: three stories in brick, except with occasional sequences of projecting brick headers to walls, piers, fence and broad modernist chimney. The dominant design element is the powerfully monumental, full-height three-bay loggia, with its plain balustrade panels, between 30 metre high piers capped with plates, beneath a cluster of dwarf posts, implying abstracted capitals. However, the effect overall is near to being Modernist, as early as 1917.

There are two flats to each floor, six in total. Fortunately, the loggia has not been glazed-in, so the architects' strong design intention remains visible. The loggia and deep eaves afford deep shadows, modelling the upper levels. The north-west corner has a full-height bow window. Both flats share the loggia (verandah) space, which many would consider an undesirable invasion of privacy.

In the same year, Lawson also completed drawings for the Grange flats, also in Wimmera Place. It is said that he designed many blocks of flats in St Kilda, but few have been identified: others known are Chirvaux, 44 Blessington Street (also 1917), Grosvenor Mansions, 74-88 Wilkin Street and possibly Bluff Mansions, 394 Barkly Street. He also designed Manhattan Bungalow, 346 Dandenong Road, St Kilda East. All three were built in 1919. Chirvaux has a single flat on each of two floors. It has a long gable roof, but many design characteristics in common with Wimmera and equally undecorated and Modernist. It forms a similar pair with 46, presumably also by Lawson.

But 44 Blessington Street is a more complex, asymmetrical composition, with a boldly designed external stair. Natural materials predominate, including bell cast timber shingles

cladding balconies. Building permit numbers for all four Lawson flats are almost consecutive; presumably they were then built at the same time, during the war. Possibly their use could have initially been for military personnel? However, the owners were different individuals.

However, Lawson is best known for his work in South Yarra, which appears to me more gimmick-laden and less refined, more Spanish Mission influenced and of less advanced Modernism. Between the entire Inter-war period (1920-40), he designed several large, highly visible blocks of flats which occupy much of the entire large block of Alexander Avenue, Darling Street, Domain Road and Punt Road and all decorated with cement render. The most prominent and significant of these is Beverley Hills Apartments, 61-65 Darling Street (1935-36). This has its own swimming pool with a below-water level viewing window. It is a much more openly commercial expression than his work in St Kilda, seventeen years earlier, and less architecturally advanced.

Of the twenty significant Arts-and-Crafts and duplex designs in St Kilda; eight are either attributed to Lawson, or are in his St Kilda manner. Other than those mentioned above, these include: 245 Barkly Street, (a duplex by Richardson and Wood, 1914); Dalgety Court, 43 Dalgety Street (1919 & 1936, Lawson); 327-328 Beaconsfield Parade (1915-16 Klingender & Alsop); 23-29 Robe Street (1926, possibly Lawson); Charnwood Oaks, 4-8 Charnwood Crescent (1920, Robert Haddon & Henderson) and Biltmore, 36 Eildon Road (possibly also by Haddon, c 1919).

All have some Lawnesque characteristics: natural materials, deep eaves, undecorated, central front loggia, tall piers and modernist characteristics. Of those, two have some influence of the English Arts-and-Crafts architect Charles F.A. Voysey (1857-1941): Biltmore and Charnwood Oaks which are clad with roughcast finish and shingles with wide eaves, Asian influence, oriel windows, portholes, horizontal bands of windows and bold piers extending above the roofline. Another is the 20 Gurner Street duplex (J.J. Meyher, 1913).

The next group of inter-war Arts-and-Craft flats was influenced by Californian Bungalow houses: Belmont, 86 Alma Road, (Richardson & Wood, 1923); San Remo, 354 Beaconsfield Parade (H.V. Gillespie, 1923; 360 Beaconsfield Parade (A. Ikin, 1927); Yurnga, 36 Brighton Road (H.R. Johnson, 1920-21); Darjeeling, 15 Foster Street (H.V. Gillespie, 1924); Aldershot, 27-29 Gurner Street (G.F. Trudgeon, 1919) and 14-20 Victoria Street (W.E. Tonks, 1918).

Californian Bungalows have low-pitched nested roofs, usually gables, bow or bay windows, or balconies, natural materials such as brick, roughcast, timber and shingles as cladding, timber posts on pylons, and casement windows. A few of these flats such as Belmont actually look like big Californian Bungalows, but most use bungalow elements in an interesting composition to give scale and warm tactile qualities to what would otherwise be big boring blocks of flats.

A final group freely adopts a refreshingly stripped down Classical language: 60 Grey Street; Summerland, (15, Christopher Cowper, 1920-21) and Southwold, 57 Acland Street (1915, designer unknown).

A few of the flats virtually defy analysis and can't readily adopt any stylistic label: Aldershot and particularly Windsor Court, 24-26 Robe Street, by J & V. Gillespie, 1919. Some of these rely also on strong massing and unusual composition for their design impact, as: Darjeeling and 60 Grey Street (R. Clifford Taylor, 1921).

Wimmera is much simpler than these challenging designs, but no less satisfying a design. It is to be hoped that the flats I have described as Arts-and-Crafts and particularly the early work of Howard R. Lawson in St Kilda will be studied and appreciated in greater depth than has been possible so briefly here.

References

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