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**The Priory
(Former Boarding House Annexe, The Priory Ladies' School)
61 Alma Road (cnr of Odessa Street), St Kilda**



The Priory, 2002

We publish this week ... a house erected at Alma-road St Kilda, for Miss Hatchell Brown, adjoining her present Ladies' Boarding and Day School and forming a handsome and commodious additional accommodation for over twenty boarders. Miss Brown's Ladies' School holds a premier position in St Kilda. The course of instruction includes all the branches necessary, and a thorough good English education as well as French, Latin, Drawing, Painting, Needlework and Music, all the leading professors and masters being employed for each branch, and being within ten minutes walk of the St Kilda and Chapel-street tramways, the situation is most convenient.

The style of architecture of the new house is entirely new in these colonies, being American Romanesque inside and out, and containing the newest features as Mr Kilburn has only just returned from his trip to America and the Continent and England, undertaken last year. The materials used are brick and cement dressings and slated roofing and the cost

is very reasonable. The architects are Messrs Ellerker and Kilburn of Collins-street, and the builders are Messrs Long and Mason of North-street, Coburg.

So, *The Builder & Contractors' News* purred in 1890. Although there are several public buildings here in American (or Richardsonian) Romanesque, such as: the former South Yarra Post Office, 162 Toorak Road, South Yarra (1892, A J McDonald), the Victorian Artists' Society, 430 Albert Street, East Melbourne (Richard Speight & H W Tomkins, 1893 (21)) and Armadale Infants School, Densham Road, Armadale (1901-02, S E Bindley); all are later than The Priory. Houses in this style are rare, in Melbourne.

Apart from later terraced houses in Park Street, South Yarra (1905) and Clarendon Street, East Melbourne (c1905), The Priory and its slightly younger sister, Cestria, 521 Glenferrie Road, Hawthorn (1891, E. G. Kilburn) are known to be unique in Melbourne. They could be transplanted directly from Prairie Avenue, or Avers Avenue, South Chicago.

Edward George Kilburn (1859-94) architect of The Priory, designed at least 30 houses alone, but in 1885, he joined William Henry Ellerker (d1891) in partnership. Ellerker started with the Public Works Department and found early success as second prize-winner in the major competition for government school designs in 1873 (34). His Gothic design was built as Lee Street Primary, North Carlton in 1878. He went on to design 75 buildings. Then, over 1885-91, Ellerker and Kilburn designed 60 offices, banks and houses, including in 1887 with William Pitt (33) the 500 room Federal Coffee Palace, Collins Street (sadly, demolished).

Their most extraordinary surviving building is the City of Melbourne (Building Society) Building at 112 Elizabeth Street (corner of Little Collins Street) built in 1888, and completed just before Kilburn's trip to the USA, yet already with exuberant American influence, untamed and without the Chicago sophistication he showed at The Priory, on his return.

H. H. Richardson (1838-86) whose work so influenced the design of The Priory, was the first American architect of incontestable genius. He influenced Louis Sullivan, the master of Frank Lloyd Wright and Walter Burley Griffin, the designer of Canberra (3). Griffin opened an office in Melbourne in 1914-24, and so the Chicago style came full circle, to return through the direct influence here of Griffin. Richardson's buildings express a ruggedly powerful interpretation of the Romanesque architectural style.

The Richardsonian Romanesque was a re-casting of the early French medieval architectural style, resurrected a thousand years later. At the Priory, the rugged stone is mocked up in cement render, in a fascinating cyclopean rustication over big Romanesque arches and internally, over the chimney pieces. First floor windows have stubby colonettes.

The chimneys are most unusual, consisting of a bunch of four plain cylinders, tied with a decorative band, like an amulet. The gables also are unusual with curious rounded taps.

The Priory was one of several girls private boarding, or day schools in St Kilda, including Oberwyl (1867-1931, (27), and Wattle House (1863-80? (23)). Hofwyl House Academy (1862-C20) is the only known St Kilda private school in the nineteenth century, open for boys. (44). These schools were fee-paying and received no government funding, or controlling interference.

As early as 1872, J Morris owned Lansmere, a two-storied brick half-timbered house, with interesting Gothic arcading and elaborate barge-boards, somewhat like Wattle House (23), as well as the nine-roomed timber Sherwood Cottage next door. He used them both as a 'collegiate academy'.

Lansmere was sold in 1875, and leased to Reverend Backhouse, then from 1877, to Reverend Benjamin. Later they both became part of The Priory School. Lansmere is visible in the 1890 illustration of the newly constructed building, The Priory.

In 1983, The Priory was purchased as a family home by the eminent Australian stage and costume designer Kenneth Rowell. His brother, John Rowell was also an artist. Their mother, Eugene Durran was the daughter of James Durran, architect of the firm Tombd & Durran, architects in Edwardian Geelong. His brother was a landscape designer. Kenneth Rowell had been a young painter and dancer in the Borovansky Ballet, designing then for the Ballet Rambert of London, on its first post-war tour to Australia in 1947. In 1950, he was awarded a British Council scholarship to travel to England.

Soon he was designing in London for the Old Vic Company, the Shakespeare Memorial Company (as it was then known) in Stratford, Sadlers Wells Opera, Ballet Rambert, The Festival Ballet and the Royal Ballet, Covent Garden, the Prospect Theatre Company and the National Theatre Ballet Company.

Kenneth Rowell's career continued in parallel in Australia, designing for the Australian Ballet, and since 1956 the Australian Opera. Overall, he has designed more than 70 productions, particularly ballet, in Australia, England and Europe. The National Gallery, Canberra, holds a large collection of his designs. He is best known for the radical Robert Helpmann and Peter Sculthorpe *Sun Music* ballet in 1968, for the Australian Ballet, the most ambitious Australian dance production to that date. He continued to paint, exhibiting at Tolarno Galleries (17) and was Artist-in-Residence at the University of Melbourne in 1982, just before moving into The Priory.

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