

41

Surrey Court 71 Ormond Road, Elwood

Surrey Court is an enticing private stage-set, on which to live a fantasy masque, into which knights in shining armour, distressed damsels, jousting white chargers, even dragons, must shortly play their part. Perhaps it exists uniquely in St Kilda, an enclosed world, externally accessible only through two *sotoportegi*. These provide the only way in to the verdant central courtyard, around which the two-storied flats are arrayed. Not particularly refined architecture, but great fun, after suspension of disbelief.



A panorama of Surrey Court, 2004

The architect for Surrey Court was local, J.H.Esmond Dorney, for the owners, Surrey Court Pty. Ltd. It really is still very intact and well cared-for. It was probably a speculative development for the rental market.

Little is known about Dorney. The *Twentieth Century Architectural Study* was amazed at the diversity of ‘stylistic bandwagons that Dorney is prepared to board.’ Chenier, 8 Glenhuntly Road (1934) is English Arts-and-Crafts (the *Study* optimistically suggests ‘Prairie School’); and 51 Ormond Esplanade (1939) is Modernist. St Keirans, 57 Ormond Esplanade, 4-4A and 39 Shelley Street may also be by Dorney, (42).

Many substantial changes were made to the design of Surrey Court, once St Kilda Council issued their permit in June 1933. The roof was entirely redesigned as gables and even the prominent gables over the *sotoportegi*, really the building’s strongest design element, are not on the approved drawings. These also only show the western half of the complex; perhaps it was staged construction (or, merely not shown as it was a mirror-image). There

were two 2-bedroom and four single-bedroom flats on each floor. Four months later, another permit was sought, only to add another flat inside the rear roof, but this alteration was apparently not approved.

Built in 1933, Surrey Court's architectural style is Old English: a picturesque, vernacular manner popularised in 1860s England, by fashionable architects Richard Norman Shaw (1819-72) and William Nesfield (1835-88), derived from Shaw's understanding of the composition and elements of vernacular Medieval houses surviving then in the Weald of Sussex. There were tall, red brick chimneys, tile-hung wall-cladding, picturesque rooflines, and mullioned windows with leaded lights.

Shaw used the style for ample country houses, such as Leys Wood at Groombridge, in Sussex (1868-69), a fabulous house now sadly demolished, and Cragside, Northumberland (1870-85), surviving entirely. Influenced by the writing of John Ruskin, this style was a reaction against urbanisation and industrialisation, when after 1850, these inexorable forces changed European cities so radically. It was also an approach which suited a building complex built in stages, and to varying flat layouts.

In the twentieth century, this revival of Medieval English domestic architecture was itself revived and hugely popularised for more middle-class owners. In England, this began with the building of the chocolate magnate Cadbury family's employee and community housing at Bournville in Birmingham (1902-25): picturesque, half-timbered, Medieval Revival buildings, of very high quality. Later, and more widely known internationally, fashionable Liberty's department store in Regent Street, London in 1924, a massive enterprise, built in real old oak timbers taken from superannuated man-o-war sailing ships, hand-made roofing tiles and leaded stained glass windows.

There was also pervasive influence from the Californian post-Depression 'half-timbered English' domestic style, derived from the homes of the stars, in Hollywood.

Soon after, even in remote Melbourne: Toorak Road shops, Whitehorse Road, Balwyn Road shops, pubs such as the Riverside Inn, on the river at Punt Road (designed by R.H. McIntyre, architect of the Prince of Wales, St Kilda, and now demolished) and rambling blocks of flats, such as fabulous Denby Dale, 424 Glenferrie Road, Malvern (Robert Hamilton and Marcus Norris, 1938), perhaps the finest in Melbourne, and other great houses here such as Westford, 2 Ash Grove, Malvern (A.H. Fisher, 1890; one of the earliest Old English buildings in Australia).

In St Kilda, Old English was a fashionable and romantic style for flats, from 1919-41: a cheery tonic after the rigours of the Great War. The earliest, pioneering the style in Victoria, was Arthur Plaisted's Hampden, 74 Barkly Street of 1919-20, well before Liberty's in London and contemporary with Bournville. He followed this with Hartpur Court, 11 Milton Street (1923), and the Tudoresque, Le Chateau flats in 1925. Next, chronologically, is Surrey Court, then Askolat, 301 Carlisle Street, by Leslie J.W. Reed (1934); 628 St Kilda Road, by Marsh & Michaelson (1936); Clovelly, 136 Alma Road by J Plottel; 1 Victoria Avenue, by Gordon E.E. Gibson (1938), tiny and oddly shaped; and

Keith Court, 27 Brighton Road by R.C. Richards (1941), plain, severe, with flat roofs, yet with beautiful Tudor details. A total of nine Old English flats complexes were built in St Kilda: more than any other style, except the Arts-and-Crafts, of which 20 can be identified.

At Surrey Court, there are all the characteristics of the style: jettied first floors, diverse finishing materials (render, clinker brick, sandstone dressings), oriel windows, diamond leadlight glazing, jerkin-head gables, heavy barges, tile-hung window hoods, and the courtyard itself: all Medieval elements. Even window-boxes on corbels are shown on the drawings.

Although the theatrically romantic layout at Surrey Court is unique in St Kilda, it is the Old English works of Arthur W. Plaisted, which are finest architecturally: Hampden and Hartpury Court, as well as individual houses, such as Limerick Lodge, 58 Brighton Road (1927-28) which is so finely detailed, as to include timber pegs instead of nails as visible fixings. At Hartpury Court, the effect that Plaisted's client, Dr Frank Green sought from Plaisted was of an English Country House, with a mouth-wateringly cute village nestling on its western boundary, with a croquet lawn between.

Plaisted's *cause celebre* came when precocious Melbourne University Architecture Atelier student, Robin Boyd (46), writing in the influential student periodical, *Smudges*, fired with an excess of Modernist zeal, awarded Plaisted's Castle Towers, Marne Street, South Yarra, the 'Blot of the Month', and Plaisted responded sharply, slapping a legal writ on the young Boyd. The forces of historicism were fighting Modernism back.

Ironically, towards the end of his life, Boyd began to embrace as Post-Modernist, such pastiche historicism as the Old Melbourne Motor Inn, North Melbourne. Delight, as experienced at Surrey Court, is as valid an expectation of architectural experience, as either commodity or firmness.

References

Dixon, Roger & Muthesius, Stefan. *Victorian Architecture*. Thames & Hudson. (1985) 1991. pp 53 & 54.

Goad, Philip, *Melbourne Architecture*. The Watermark Press. Sydney 1999. pp115, 146 & 273.

Peck, Robert. von Hartel. Trethowan & Henshall Hansen Associates. *City of St Kilda Twentieth Century Architectural Study*. St Kilda. May 1992. (Unpaginated).

Raworth, Bryce. 'A Question of Style. Inter-War Domestic Architecture in Melbourne'. Master of Architecture Thesis, University of Melbourne. 1993.

Sawyer, Terry. *Residential Flats in Melbourne. The Development of a Building Type*. Research Report, 5th Year Architecture. University of Melbourne. 1982.

Storey, Rohan. 'Significant Flats in Melbourne,' *Trust News*. May 1989. pp 18 & 19.

Richard Peterson: A Place of Sensuous Resort: Buildings of St Kilda and Their People

St Kilda City Council permits no. 8290, issued 23 June 1933 and no. 8362, issued 2 October 1933.