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## **Woy Woy 77 Marine Parade, Elwood**



Woy Woy, 2002

Designed by architect Geoffrey Mewton of Mewton and Grounds in 1935-36, Woy Woy is not only the earliest of a small group of Modernist flats in St Kilda, but also certainly the earliest in Melbourne, and arguably, in Australia. Sydney flats, tend to retain decorative elements of Moderne streamlining. But Woy Woy is austere, daringly minimal, rendered plain, without ornament. The design is in the composition of pure, pale, geometric forms. Arguably, Woy Woy is the earliest, multi-storied, Modernist building in Australia. Its only

competitor for this accolade would seem to be Cairo flats, 98 Nicholson Street, Fitzroy (also 1935-36) designed by architect Best Overend, of Taylor Soilleux and Overend.

The only modestly decorative indulgence at Woy Woy is the name, jauntily applied in blocky relief letters, as if snatched from a Ginger Meggs comic strip, and a small cream brick nib. The connection of the flats with the coastal town north of Sydney, is not known. At three stories with an accessible roof (it seems taller), Woy Woy is still the tallest building along the waterfront, south of Edgewater Towers.

The interlocking cubic forms at Woy Woy, reveal Mewton's interest in the works of Willem Marinus Dudok, whose best-known building, the Raadhuis at Hilversum, Netherlands (1928-31, **38**), but Mewton avoids Dudok's decorative flashes. Mewton's design is also firmly in the slipstream of International Modernism, as if it were one bay of Mies van der Rohe's flats at his Weissenhof Siedlung estate, high above Stuttgart (1927).

A companion block was planned for the rear of Woy Woy, to face Lytton Street, but never built. Relatively recent alterations at Woy Woy have reduced its integrity, including that: most window sills have been lowered by 250mm; only the ground floor window is original. (This is a frequently requested alteration in historic buildings, to increase light and views to current expectations, but it does diminish the carefully determined façade composition and proportion). So, steel window frames have been replaced with aluminium (again, to different effect). The front stairs have been extended to the roof, and the date, 1936 has been gratuitously insinuated onto the upper stair.

Interiors are tightly planned and include interesting details like a breakfast inglenook. Oddly, floors are insulated with concrete between timber joists. For Woy Woy is not a reinforced concrete building as might be imagined, but brick, with timber-framed floors.

In the same year, 1936, Mewton also designed Bellaire, 3 Cowderoy Street, St Kilda West. This is a large, three-storied block of so-called 'bachelor flats', appearing as even more severe than Woy Woy, because of its bulk. Yet, mediated by Mewton's interest in Dudok, it is unrendered, with two tones of brick: cream decorative panels in the red walls. The accessible roof increases the available open space, but is cheerfully adorned with umbrellas and planting to dress-up its views over the bay.

Here also, 'kitchenettes' have inbuilt meals inglenooks. But some planning is so tight as to be inconvenient: bedrooms so wee as to be unusable, (except by St Kilda's vertical sleepers) and the front door opening into the bedroom. Whether this was due to a too-clever architect, or (more likely), a greedy client, is unclear.

Yet even more than Woy Woy, Mewton's Bellaire looks towards post-war flat design, as the *Heritage Study's* authors perceptively note, for better or for worse; even to the ubiquitous 1960s 'six-packs,' flats of suburbs beyond St Kilda.

Geoffrey Mewton (1905- ), travelled overseas between July 1928 and 1932, studying recent architecture in Europe and America, as did successful commercial architects (such as Leighton Irwin and Marcus Barlow), other recent graduates (Best Overend and Roy Grounds) and as so many others of us have since. Mewton recalled that Dudok was the hero of every architectural student during his first years in Europe.

Mewton returned to join Roy Grounds, his exact contemporary, in partnership as Mewton and Grounds, from 1932-38. As Prof Freeland observed, Mewton and Grounds 'with their clean, pure and intensely warm buildings, set Melbourne architecture alight for a brief five years.'

In 1939, Grounds went off on his own and Mewton joined Edward Billson, as he was finishing the Warburton buildings (38). Billson had been articled to Walter Burley Griffin and was his first employee in Australia. And so the wheel turns, with so many spokes from St Kilda.

Until his retirement, Mewton then became a partner in the old established architectural firm, Godfrey and Spowers, which had been founded in 1901. It became Godfrey, Spowers, Hughes, Mewton and Lobb. Employees such as Alex Njoo recall Mewton still coming to the office as an old man. The firm continues still, as Spowers Architects.

First with Mewton, then alone, Roy Grounds could claim, virtually more than any other architect, to have brought Modernism in architecture to Australia. His Modernism is plain, unpretentious, yet consistent; assembled from simple geometric, often interlocking forms.

Roy Burman Grounds (1905-81), graduated from the University of Melbourne Architecture Atelier. He was then articled to Blackett, Forster and Craig, before travelling to the United States. He worked first in New York in 1929, then in Los Angeles as a set designer for RKO and MGM Studios, before returning to Melbourne in 1932, and partnership with Mewton. They were prolific designers, producing a series of at least 15 Modernist houses with open floor plans and flat roofs, responding to local conditions, which made the running for subsequent Modernist domestic design in Australia: fifteen years before Harry Seidler's first house in Sydney.

Mewton designed the Stooke house in Halifax Street, Brighton (1934) and Grounds, his own house, Ranelagh, at 35 Rannoch Avenue, Mt Eliza (1933-34); arguably the two earliest Modernist buildings in Australia. These were followed by houses designed by Grounds within the partnership: Portland Lodge, 1 Plummer Avenue, Frankston (1934-35), Lyncroft, Tucks Road, Shoreham (1934), Chateau Tahbilk, Nagambie (1935), Watt house, Grosvenor Court, Toorak (1935, altered), Evan Price house, 2 Riverview Road, Essendon, (1935-36), Ingpen House, Aphrasia Street, Newtown, Geelong and 236 Kooyong Road, Toorak (both 1936). Then over 1935-36, came the two St Kilda flats, Woy Woy and Bellaire. Finally, in 1937, Grounds designed the Ramsay House, 29 Rendlesham Avenue which neatly became the Grounds House, when Grounds conveniently married his client.

On his own (1939-42), Grounds developed their approach at Woy Woy in his own manner, influentially recasting Australian flats design in sheer Modernism. Clendon (1939-42) and Clendon Corner (1940-41), 13-15 Clendon Road, Armadale; Moonbria, Mathoura Road, Toorak (1941) and Quamby, 3 Glover Court, Toorak (1941-42). Here Goad detects the influence of Scandinavian design and less obviously, of Raymond McGrath, an Australian architect who stayed in London and known for his public building interiors such as the BBC's Broadcasting House, Portland Place (1931) which are described by Nikolaus Rassner as 'daringly' modern'. Inexplicably, none of these flats is in St Kilda.

In 1953, Grounds joined Frederick Romberg (1910-92) and Robin Boyd (1919-71, **46**) as another partnership: Grounds, Romberg and Boyd became the most important architectural firm in Melbourne, over 1953-62. Afterwards, Grounds devoted his last twenty years to the gestation of his National Gallery of Victoria and Cultural Centre (now Victorian Arts Centre).

Romberg's complex contribution to Melbourne's Modernism includes two remarkable flats, recipients of the baton passed from Woy Woy and Bellaire, in Queens Road, just outside the City of St Kilda: Newburn, at 30 (1939-42) and Stanhill, at 34 (1945-50).

There are only four other Modernist blocks of flats in this early period in St Kilda, leading up to World War II: Park Court, 473 St Kilda Road (1938) developed from Bellaire, but with balconies; by significant and innovative architects, Seabrooke and Fildes, who had just designed MacRobertson Girls High School, Albert Park (1933-34), the earliest (Dudokian, and near) Modernist substantial government building in Victoria; 51 Ormond Esplanade, Elwood (1939) is J.H. Dorney's excursion into Modernism; a long stylistic trip only six years from Surrey Court (**41**). Acland Hill, 45 Acland Street (1939) by A.W. Plaisted and Burnett Lodge, 9-13 Burnett Street (c 1940) where the designer is unknown.

It is interesting to compare these daringly Modernist works with the more Sydney stylist streamlined Moderne of others. Fearful of stark modernism, your Moderne designer streamlines with round corners, corner windows, horizontal aerofoil stripes, nautical references and Art Deco decoration: stylised, prismatic, or geometric. The earliest is the Royal, Robe Street (1933), Archibald Ikin's most distinctive design. Boncap, 49 Fitzroy Street, by L. Garrard Calin has shops on the ground floor in the European manner and with cantilevered balconies. Windermere, 49 Broadway, Elwood is finely detailed and the most vigorous and remarkable composition, although its designer is not known; Del Marie, 4 St Leonards Avenue, by S.W. Hall; Taradale, 229 Brighton Road, by Walter Mason; and Valma, 17 Victoria Street by W.H. Merritt, were all built in 1936. Devon Court, 45-47 Chapel Street by Alder and Lacey is from 1938.

By World War II, such was the floating flats population of St Kilda that, over two-thirds of all accommodation in St Kilda was rented and even more remarkably, 20-30% of all households had only lived there for a year.

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