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St Kilda Soldiers' & Sailors' Memorial Hall Building 88-90A Acland Street, St Kilda

This dour square monumental pile could not be less festive and ebullient, less Acland Street, less St Kilda. Nevertheless, the security of sobriety and traditionalism was sought after the Great War. St Kilda's Memorial to the earlier Boer War is in Alfred Square. This is a fantastical design that can only be called Art Nouveau, probably by the brilliant Robert Haddon (realised by Arthur Peck) in 1905, incorporating Australian flora motifs, so fashionable to the newly federated nation, and superb craftsmanship in faience and wrought iron.

St Kilda's response to the rupture and loss of Anzac and after is really this Memorial Hall: St Kilda's Shrine of Remembrance; and designed earlier by the same architects. At the same time, an actual Cenotaph was erected to terminate Fitzroy Street, in Jacka Boulevard, designed by architect, George Hatherly Alsop.



St Kilda Soldiers' & Sailors' Memorial Hall, 2004

If not in its external appearance, then in planning terms the Memorial Hall was a concept unique for its time: an entirely community-funded multi-functional complex, with both community facilities and commercial enterprises to fund their operation and maintenance. As well as the first floor hall for meetings and dances, clubrooms and other meeting rooms on the ground floor, there were four shops on the street and twelve flats on second and third floor level, with their open space on the roof. Capital to purchase the land and erect the building was raised entirely by the St Kilda residents and council.

Philip Burgoyne Hudson was architect of some 30 buildings from 1907-39, either on his own account or in partnership with James Hastie Wardrop (1923-30) and briefly with the older Beverley Ussher, who had been architect for Melbourne's domestic Queen Anne style in the early years of the twentieth century. Wardrop also designed a few buildings on his own during 1911-22.

Hudson and Wardrop were returned servicemen who had studied under the architect Charles D'Ebro, designer of Princes Bridge (1879), Prahran Town Hall and the mansion and former government house, Stonnington, in Glenferrie Road, Malvern (1891). They entered the architectural competition for the Memorial Hall run by the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects. It was restricted to architects who were returned servicemen. There were 13 entrants and they won.

They also won the international competition for the Shrine of Remembrance in 1923, whilst the St Kilda Army and Navy Club was being built to their design. Builder R L Phillips completed the club in November 1924, in time for Remembrance Day. It is a severe, Mannerist design, with only the shallow pediments indicating that it is a public building, rather than commercial.

The Shrine is Melbourne's most important public monument, the focus of cultural identity, sentiment, even fervour. It becomes more so with each new generation, it seems. Dr Philip Goad, eminent architectural historian, sees in Hudson & Wardrop's design for the Shrine, 'the beginning of Modernism in Melbourne, breaking with the historical past, and the establishment of national identity'. Architecturally, it is a brilliant amalgam of classical Greek elements and detail. It is a massive design leap from the Memorial Hall, yet the design process of both must have overlapped in Hudson & Wardrop's office, where I found employment some forty years later.

Later, Wardrop left classicism behind and embraced Jazz Moderne as an architectural style. These buildings included Alkira House at 17 Queen Street (1936-37) and the former United Kingdom Hotel (now McDonalds') on the corner of Queens Parade and Heidelberg Road, Clifton Hill (1937-38), whose stacked cubic forms in its different style are not unlike the massing of the Shrine.

After only three years use as a dance and social hall, in January 1927, the Memorial Hall obtained a permit from the Health Department to operate as the Memorial Cinema. It continued as a cinema until 1957. There have been 13 cinemas in St Kilda since the first, the Picture Garden opened on the Upper Esplanade in 1908. However, at the time when the Memorial opened, the only other cinema operating was the St Kilda, at 125 Fitzroy Street, (excepting the Broadway, further away in Elwood). During 1924-26, three cinemas closed (the Palais, Lower Esplanade, the Picture Garden, Upper Esplanade and the Lyric, Alfred Square East). After the Memorial opened, the present Palais opened on Remembrance Day 1927 in a gesture, which seems suspiciously like clever marketing and the Mayfair opened on the Upper Esplanade in 1928.

It is not known why there were suddenly so few cinemas in St Kilda, except that this was a time of major expansion of large cinemas in the city. Certainly, early in 1927, there was a clear need for another cinema in St Kilda, at least until the Palais opened. The Memorial remained a cinema for 30 years.

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