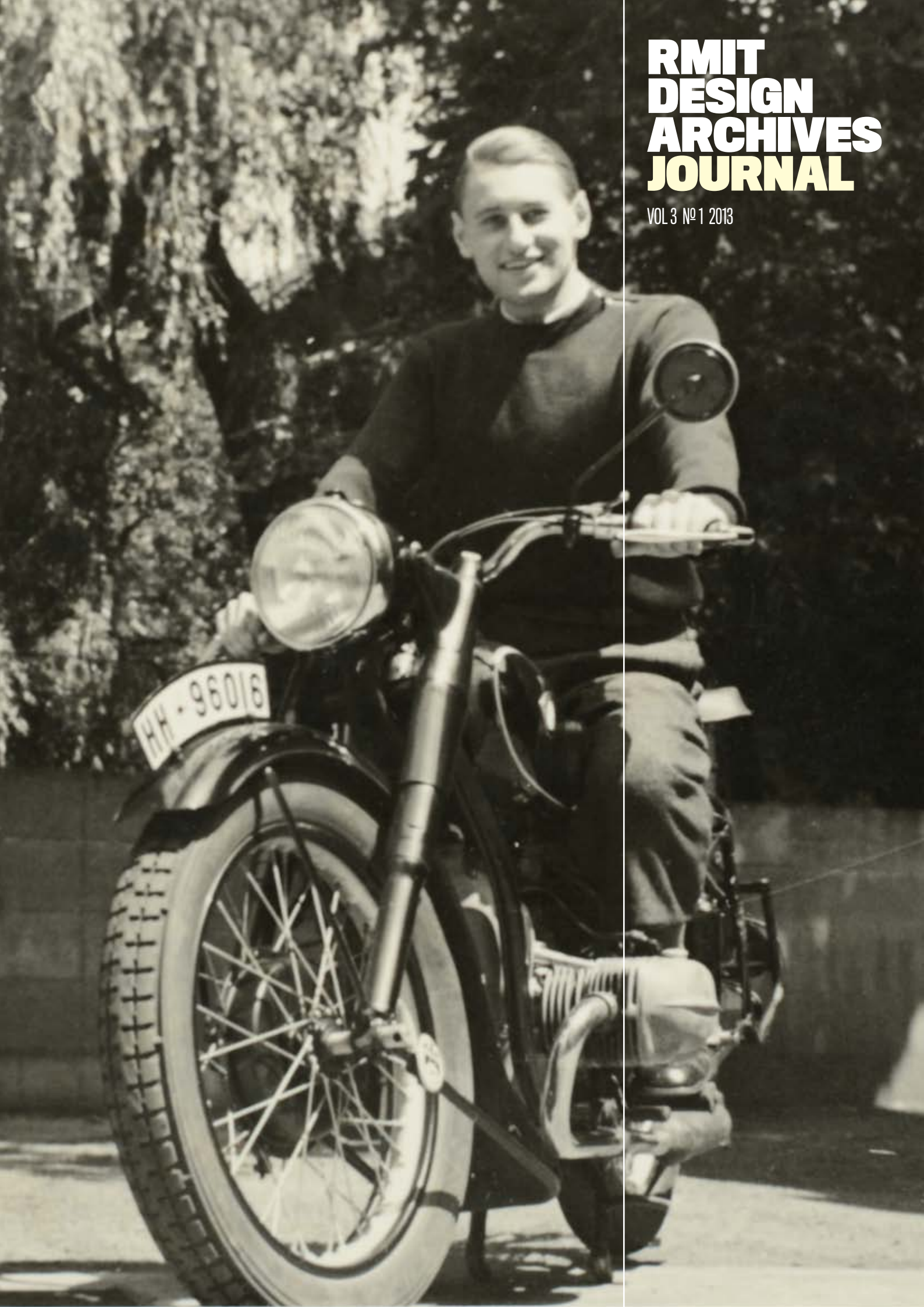


# RMIT DESIGN ARCHIVES JOURNAL

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**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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Australian Government

Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities

**Frederick Romberg: an architectural survey**

Since its beginning the RMIT Design Archives has actively sought methods of engaging contemporary design practitioners in contributing to its innovative approaches to collecting and research.

The Romberg Collection, deposited in 2008, documents the practice of eminent Melbourne architect Frederick Romberg. It has been over ten years since the first and last exposition on Romberg's output was held at RMIT Gallery. That exhibition and subsequent publication, *Frederick Romberg: The Architecture of Migration 1936–1975*, continue to serve as the most complete public record of his work to date.<sup>1</sup>

*Frederick Romberg: an architectural survey* is a collaborative interdisciplinary project that has approached the Romberg Collection with the intention of examining not only his architectural output, but the many ways in which the collection might be seen to work and have implications for contemporary discourse on design. It has sought from the nuances of a collection - the frayed edges, the insistent folds - an active archive.

Four pieces from the collection form the focus of the Romberg project: a poignant tin box that contains Romberg's student portfolio which he brought with him on his journey to Australia; a presentation photograph album of his early work; a red cloth album documenting a return journey to Europe; and a large green scrapbook that collages the work from Romberg's career and clearly exhibits the hand of the architect in its creation.

One outcome of the project, this special issue of the *RMIT Design Archives Journal*, is presented as a collection of posters that can be read together or separately. It does not draw conclusions; it simply implies that the messy resolve of a life can be brought together on one page. Essays drawn from Romberg's own account of his life and work and his travel scholarship paper, 'Australian Journey 1938', address his early life as an architecture student in Zurich, his passage to Australia from Europe, early architectural practice in Melbourne, and, an impression of his home here. The essays are accompanied by detailed three-dimensional examinations of selected buildings.

The second output of 'Frederick Romberg: an architectural survey' is a film by Keith Deverell who has also sought the framework for his project from among the printed material, scrapbooks, photograph albums, correspondence, plans, office records and personal papers that form the Romberg Collection. The artefacts produced by the project will in turn be brought into the RMIT Design Archives, constituting a collection within a collection. This collaboration will serve as evidence of the extraordinary life of an archive.

**Project members:**

Kaye Ashton: project management

Stephen Banham: graphic identity

Keith Deverell: film

Harriet Edquist: architectural historian

Michael Spooner: architectural visualisation and essays

Letó Melanie Tsolakakis: architectural visualisation

*Michael Spooner*, GUEST EDITOR





Captions accompanying personal photographs on pages 3,4 and 5 have been transcribed from Frederick Romberg, 'Before Gromboyd: an architectural history', 1986.

Albums from Romberg Collection, RMIT Design Archives.



**Top Left:** View through porthole of Romberg's cabin aboard the *Mosef*.

**Middle Left:** The good ship *Mosef*, Norddeutscher Lloyd, Bremen, 1938.

**Bottom Left:** Unlike his master, the captain's dog, Fix, was friends with all passengers, be they Dr Stratmann or Herr Rubensohn.



**Top Right:** The passengers of the *Mosef*. (From left to right, standing) Mr Hamburger, Mrs & Mr Lieblich, Miss Graetz, Miss Roehricht, Mr Falkenstein, Mr Rubensohn, Dr Stratmann, Mrs & Miss Falkenstein, Mr Riess. (From left to right, on deckchairs) Frederick Romberg, Schnucki Lieblich, Mr & Mrs Arnholz, Mrs Rubensohn, Mrs Riess. Romberg took this photo with a self-release on his Leica camera.



**Middle and bottom Right:** Deck tennis contestants: Schnucki Lieblich, Herr Hamburger, Frederick Romberg and Dr Stratmaan.





Stormy and cold in the Southern Hemisphere.



**Top Left:**  
Spencer Gulf, South Australia, September 1938.

**Bottom Left:**  
Schnucki Lieblich and Herr Hamburger inspecting the lead smelter at Port Pirie, South Australia. September 1938.



**Top Right:**  
On the wharf at Port Pirie. Schnucki Lieblich is about to set foot on Australian soil. September 1938.



**Left**  
Beauty treatment administered by Herr Riess for Dr Stratmann who is about to rejoin his family in Adelaide, 1938.



**Right:**  
The captain of the *Mose!* addressing ship's company at the 'Crossing of the Line' ceremony.



**Left:**  
Deck tennis contestants: Schnucki Lieblich, Herr Hamburger, Frederick Romberg and Dr Stratmaan.



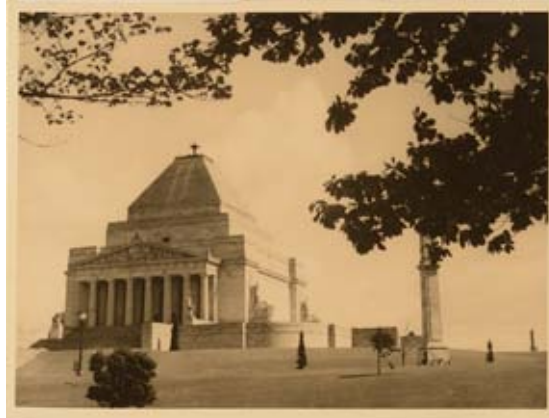


**Left Panel:**  
Verena Romberg with children at Romberg House, Heidelberg, c1954.

**Above:**  
View from the Shrine of Remembrance to the city, Melbourne, September 1938.

**Top Right:**  
The Shrine of Remembrance, Melbourne, September 1938.

**Bottom Right:**  
View of Sydney Harbour Bridge, Sydney, 1938.



**Above:**  
Frederick Romberg, c1954

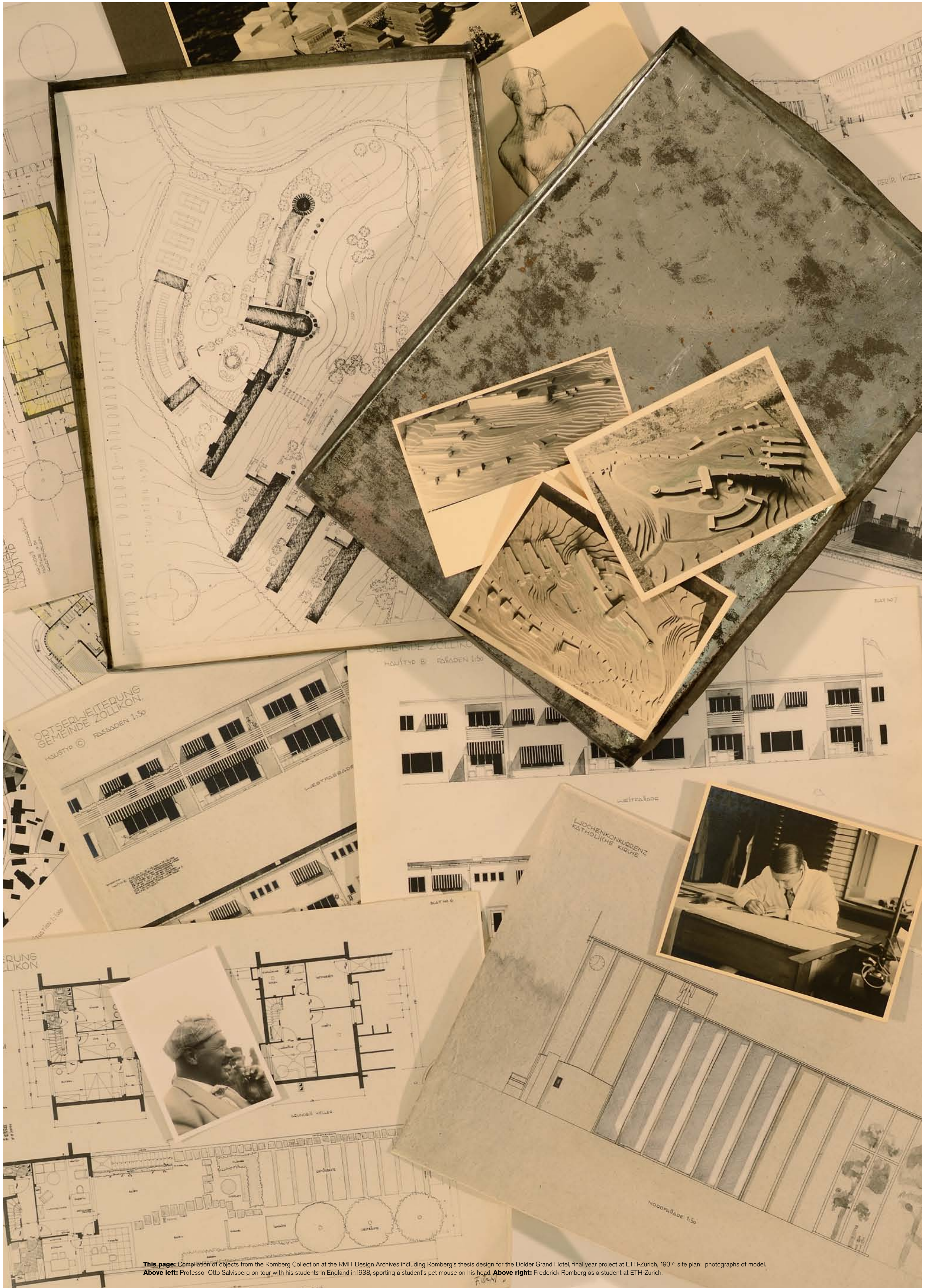
**This page:** Captions accompanying personal photographs transcribed from Frederick Romberg, 'Before Gromboyd: an architectural history', 1986.

**Above:**  
Frederick Romberg, pencil sketch of Else Riebeling, 1934.

**Right:**  
Johanna, Else & Dr Hans Riebeling, Harburg, 1946.







This page: Completion of objects from the Romberg Collection at the RMIT Design Archives including Romberg's thesis design for the Dolder Grand Hotel, final year project at ETH-Zurich, 1937; site plan; photographs of model. Above left: Professor Otto Salvisberg on tour with his students in England in 1938, sporting a student's pet mouse on his head. Above right: Frederick Romberg as a student at ETH-Zurich.



In 1931, on completion of his matriculation from the Stresemann Real-Gymnasium in Harburg, Germany, eighteen year old Frederick Romberg began reading Law at the University of Geneva. After the first year, he admitted that he had made little progress academically; subsequently he transferred to the University of Munich where he continued law studies. In contrast to the genteel and well-heeled student life in Geneva, in Munich, Romberg encountered an atmosphere of mounting political violence which saw the first public demonstrations against Jewish professors, and the presence of Stormtroopers. In response Romberg took up with a number of leftist opposition groups and for this reason became known to the police.

As the Nazi Party established itself as the political force in Munich, Romberg relocated himself and moved his studies to the University of Kiel, where the relative remoteness enabled him to focus on his studies rather than politics. However, increasing political turmoil eventually compelled Romberg to make his way to Berlin, where visits to the opera, theatre, concerts and cabaret contrasted with the deteriorating social, economic and political conditions of Weimar Germany.

From Berlin, Romberg returned to Kiel determined to finish his law studies. However, he could not distance himself for long from the political situation in Germany, the University requiring him to declare his Aryan origins to re-enrol. To avoid suspicion of leftist sympathies, he joined the local motor auxiliary, an organisation sanctioned by the Nazi Party. At the least the organisation enabled him to continue his fascination with motorbikes.

At the end of the semester he returned to Harburg. Summoned to Munich to appear before the University's disciplinary commission to face scrutiny about his previous political activities when a student there, Romberg fled by train to Zurich. He had heard of the disappearance of politically active friends, and feared that the charges may be a pretext by which he could be detained in a labour camp.

A return to Germany was out of the question and a career in law was limited by the context of foreign practice and thus Romberg was resigned to consider other professional options. During the train trip to Switzerland he committed to becoming an architect and on arrival in Zurich enrolled at the prestigious Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH-Z).

For the next five years after his arrival in Switzerland in 1933 Romberg was surrounded by a flourishing German culture strengthened by émigrés fleeing the rise of Nazism. Here, Romberg was able to indulge cultural activities and even attended book readings by the German author Thomas Mann. Soon after his arrival in Zurich the charges brought against him by the University of Munich were dismissed for lack of evidence and his passport was renewed allowing him to once again enter Germany during breaks in his architecture studies. During one journey Romberg undertook the risk of smuggling marks back into Germany because they could not be exchanged in Switzerland. At the German-Swiss border, his car was examined and he was searched down to his socks. Left standing near naked he exasperatedly asked the attending officer if he should do away with even these items of clothing. Despite this indignity Romberg was eventually released without the money being requisitioned: he had lined his socks with it.

At ETH-Z Romberg's experience of architecture would be shaped by his design tutors. He became friendly with Professor Friedrich Hess who advocated the values of *Heimatsstil*, a movement that encouraged the development of architecture incorporating specific materials and form that reflected the traditional rural character of a particular region. He was further influenced by the charisma and urbane lifestyle of Professor Otto Rudolf Salvisberg, an architect who had been responsible for a number of innovative housing estates in Berlin, and who was to be the designer for the extensive new factories and offices for the pharmaceutical firm, Hoffmann-La Roche in Europe and abroad.

Salvisberg's architecture office was located at ETH-Z where Romberg was placed as an intern for six months. During this time he assisted on the design of the residence of Emil Barel, the Managing Director of La Roche, detailing the wall of windows that mechanically disappeared into the ground at the touch of a button, thus opening the interior of the house onto the garden. This may have been the period when Romberg acquired a copy of the technical drawings which he carried with him to Australia that detailed the grand sweeping staircase of the Hoffman-La Roche administration wing.<sup>1</sup>

In 1938 Romberg faced the challenge of completing his thesis project. Even then, such an undertaking was characterised by long and erratic working hours during which periods his appearance was prone to become unkempt and he cobbled together basic meals. As he recalled: 'I used to arrange with my landlady to have a pint of cream delivered every day, which I could mix with Ovaltine and a dash of cherry liquor – not bad actually and quite adequate for temporary sustenance.'<sup>2</sup>

Romberg's final Diploma project, a hotel complex, was located on a hill overlooking Lake Zurich, and was to replace the existing Dolder Grand Hotel. In the proposal the main block swept along the edge of a flattened area of hill, and contained serviced apartments, a restaurant, stage and cylindrical dance hall. Three additional blocks of apartments with café and courtyard were tiered down the slope beneath the main compound, and were serviced from the main building by a series of underground cable cars. Ironically, where Romberg's thesis was only a proposal, a fellow graduate would become the architect for additions to the original 1899 Hotel some years later.<sup>3</sup>

In 1968, Romberg stayed at the Dolder Grand Hotel on a visit to Europe with his second wife, Diane, and young son, Jason. He recounts that he was able to show Diane a secret stair to a lookout which he recalled from his investigations during his thesis preparation; 'the view was as glorious, and the pigeon droppings as numerous'<sup>4</sup> as when he had first discovered it in 1938.

With the completion of his final year at university Romberg was no longer a student and thus required to return to Germany. Faced with the threat of a military call-up on his return, he thought to undertake a doctoral thesis at ETH-Z, but soon after enrolling was awarded a travel scholarship by the Swiss Federal Board of Education, with which he intended to journey to Australia. A fellow student, Hans Menne, had connections with the State Electricity Commission (SEC) in Melbourne. Menne's family had billeted an Australian soldier who was part of the occupying force in the Rhineland, and the soldier, now an executive at the SEC, had offered Menne assistance in acquiring work in Australia. Menne however elected to join the Nazi Party. Romberg was able to take up the offer instead, thanks to an excellent reference from Salvisberg.

Departing Zurich in August 1938 on his BMW motorbike, Romberg rode to Bremen to enquire about available boat passages to Australia. It was here that he was confronted with the reality of a growing number of people trying to escape Nazi Germany, and was informed that all routes were fully booked for the next twelve months. It was only a late cancellation that enabled him to acquire a ticket. While it was a requirement of entry into Australia that he purchase a return ticket, Romberg admitted that from the outset he never had any intention of returning to Europe.<sup>5</sup>

On 16 August 1938 the German ship, the *Mosel*, departed Antwerp for the five week journey to Australia. The *Mosel* was an ordinary freighter with room for about a dozen passengers however due to demand officers' cabins had been made available for passengers. Romberg was given a comfortable cabin with porthole view to the foredeck. His fellow travellers were nearly all Jewish refugees from Germany and unused to sea travel. Romberg amusingly recalled one passenger who spent four days on deck watching for dolphins after missing their first appearance.<sup>6</sup>

Australia was sighted on the 22 September 1938, and the *Mosel* berthed at Port Pirie on the edge of the Spencer Gulf, South Australia. None of the passengers knew what to expect, but the first view was favourably compared with their memories of European landscapes.<sup>7</sup> On arrival the passengers received the only mail in five weeks, which revealed the brutal intent of the anti-Jewish campaign in Germany. At port, passengers were required to stay on board for official immigration and health checks. Most had never travelled to a foreign country, and had not forgotten the harassment they had faced from officials in Germany. On filling in a questionnaire one couple proceeded to put 'Jewish' under the race box, but were informed by the customs officer that this was a religious sect and not considered a race in Australia. As passengers disembarked, they watched the *Mosel* being loaded with lead bars from the smelter works lining the harbour for the return trip to Germany.

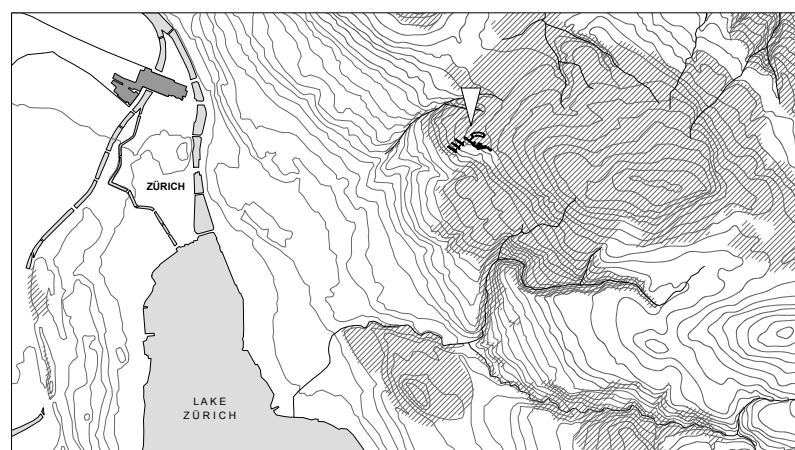
Romberg, having procured money, a police certificate of character and a health certificate along with a letter of recommendation from the University, had his passport stamped on receipt of the return ticket. He had arrived in Australia.

Australian Government  
Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities

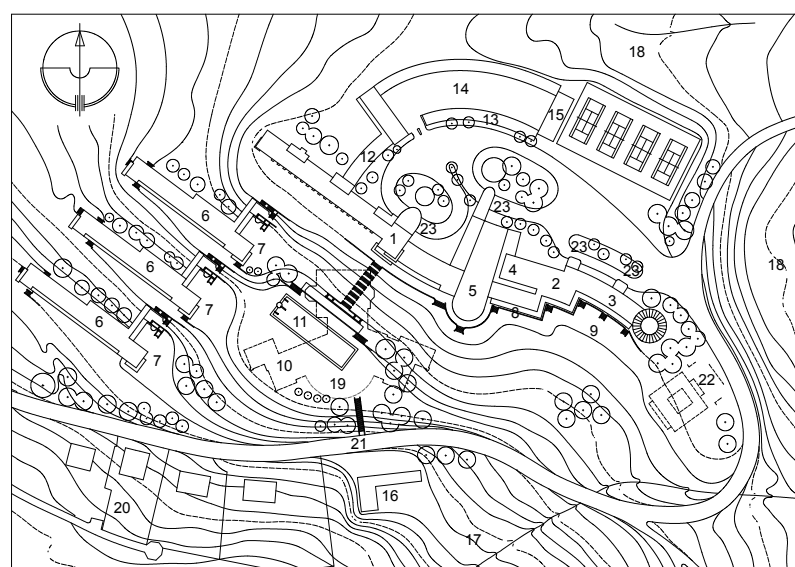
#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Frederick Romberg: an architectural survey is supported through funding from the Australian Government's Your Community Heritage Program.

#### FREDERICK ROMBERG, THESIS PROJECT, ETH-Z. DOLDER GRAND HOTEL, ZURICH, 1938 (UNBUILT) Drawings and visualisations by Michael Spooner

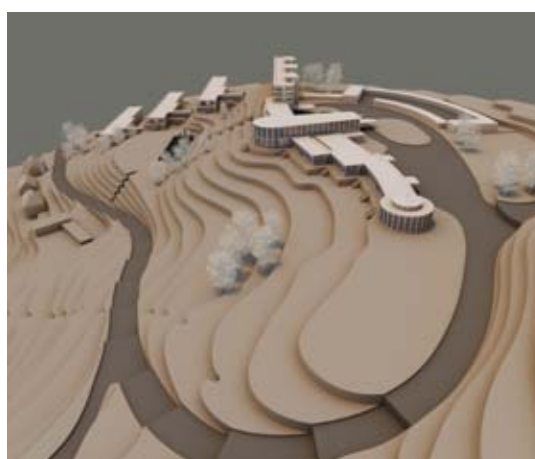
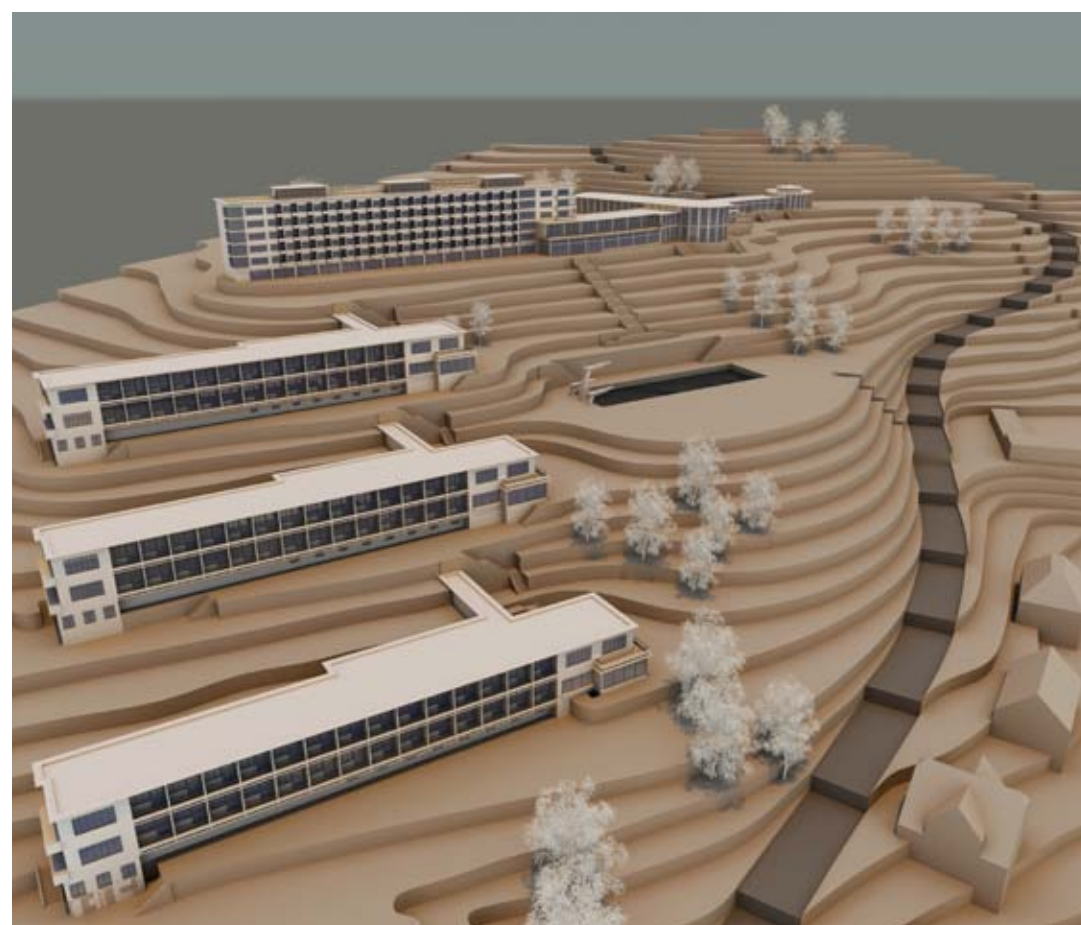
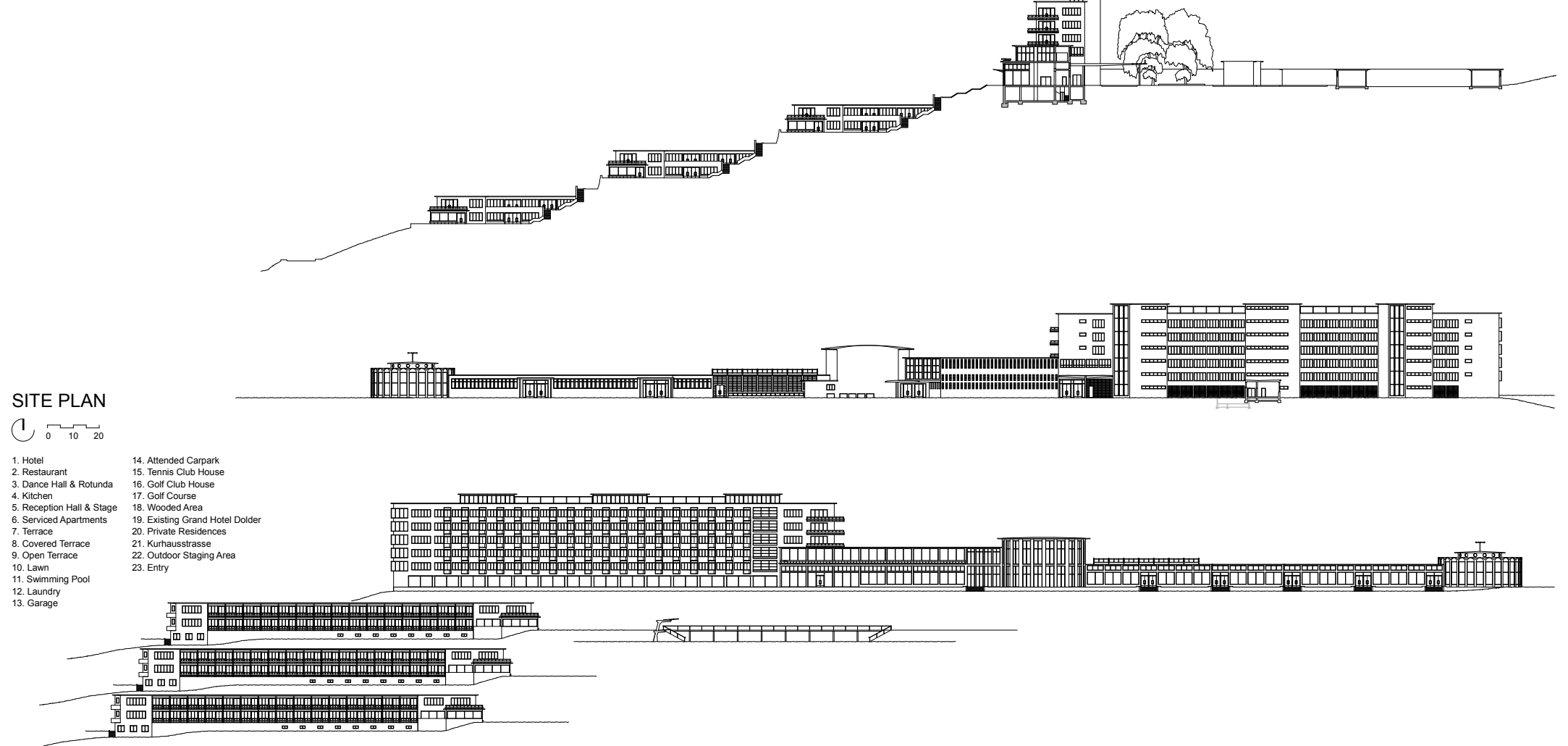


LOCATION PLAN



SITE PLAN

1. Hotel
2. Restaurant
3. Dance Hall & Rotunda
4. Kitchen
5. Reception Hall & Stage
6. Serviced Apartments
7. Terrace
8. Covered Terrace
9. Open Terrace
10. Lawn
11. Swimming Pool
12. Laundry
13. Garage
14. Attended Carpark
15. Tennis Club House
16. Golf Club House
17. Golf Course
18. Wooded Area
19. Existing Grand Hotel Dolder
20. Private Residences
21. Kurhausstrasse
22. Outdoor Staging Area
23. Entry



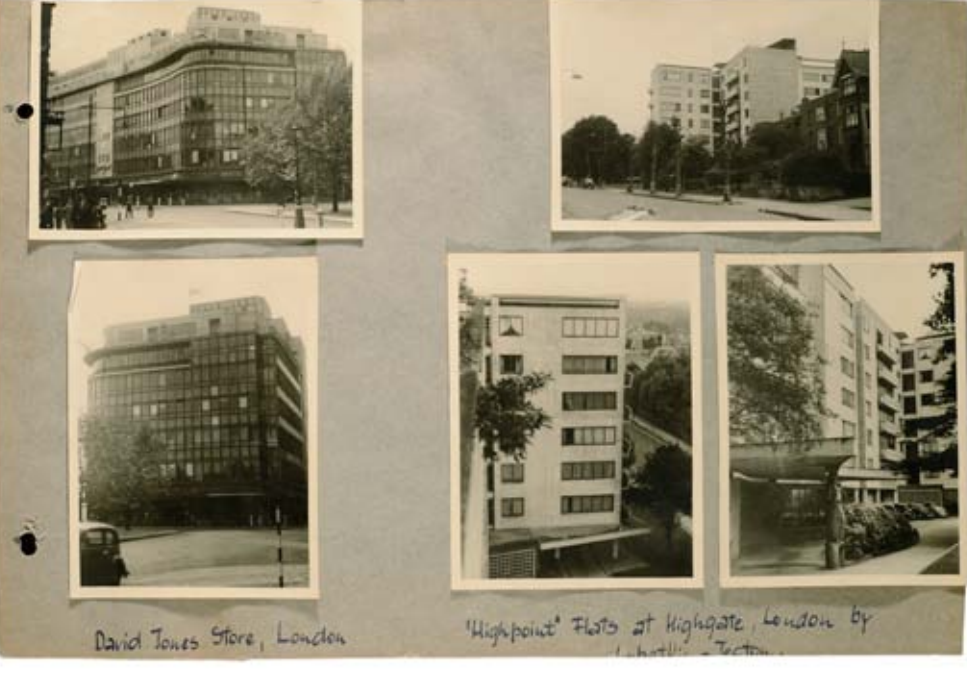
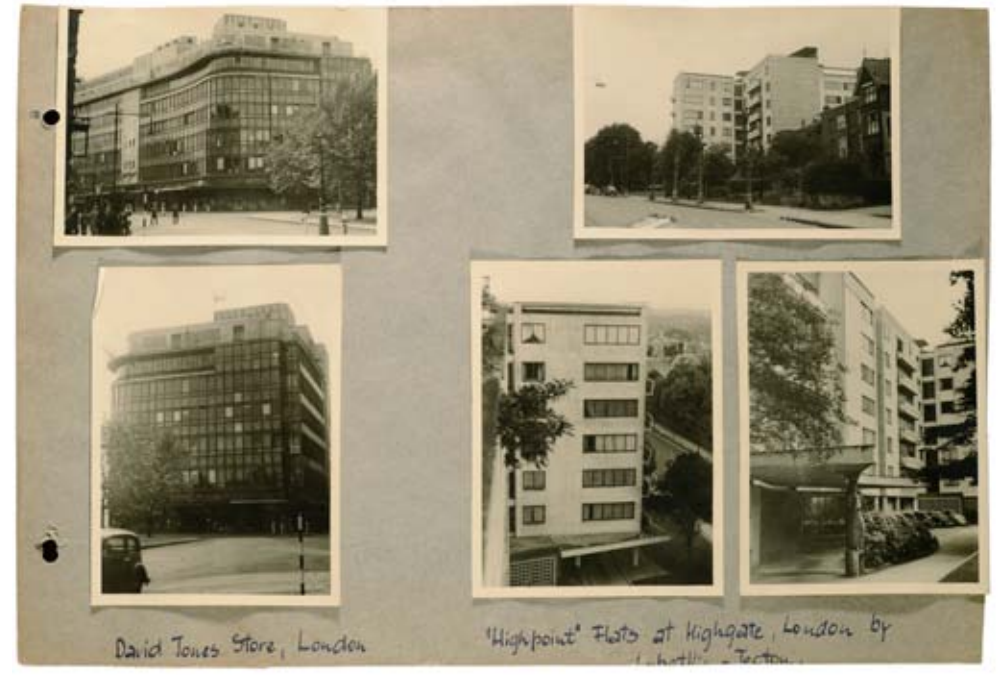
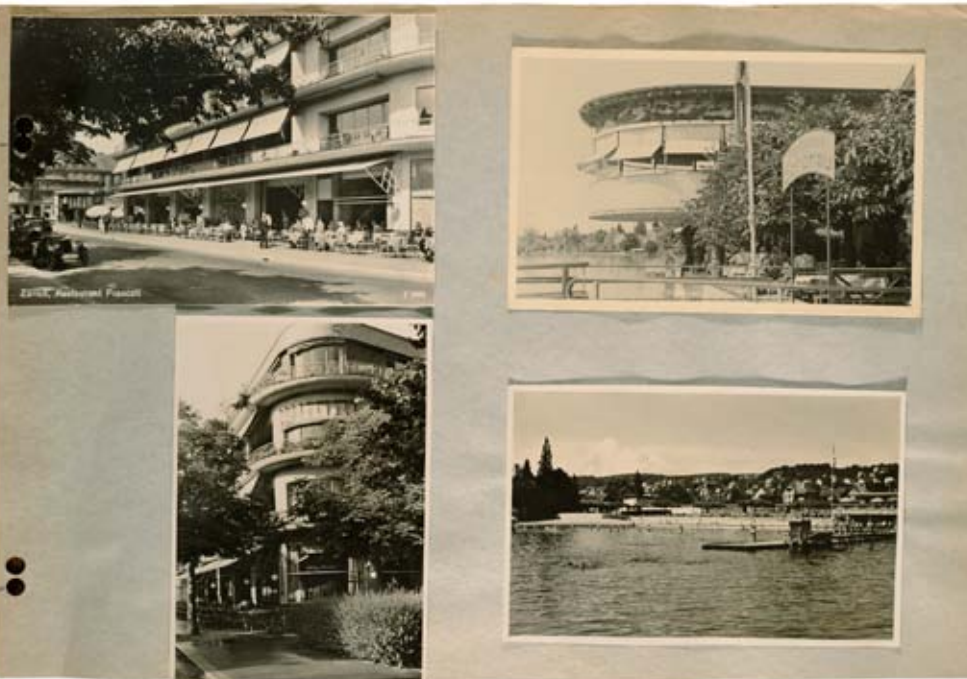
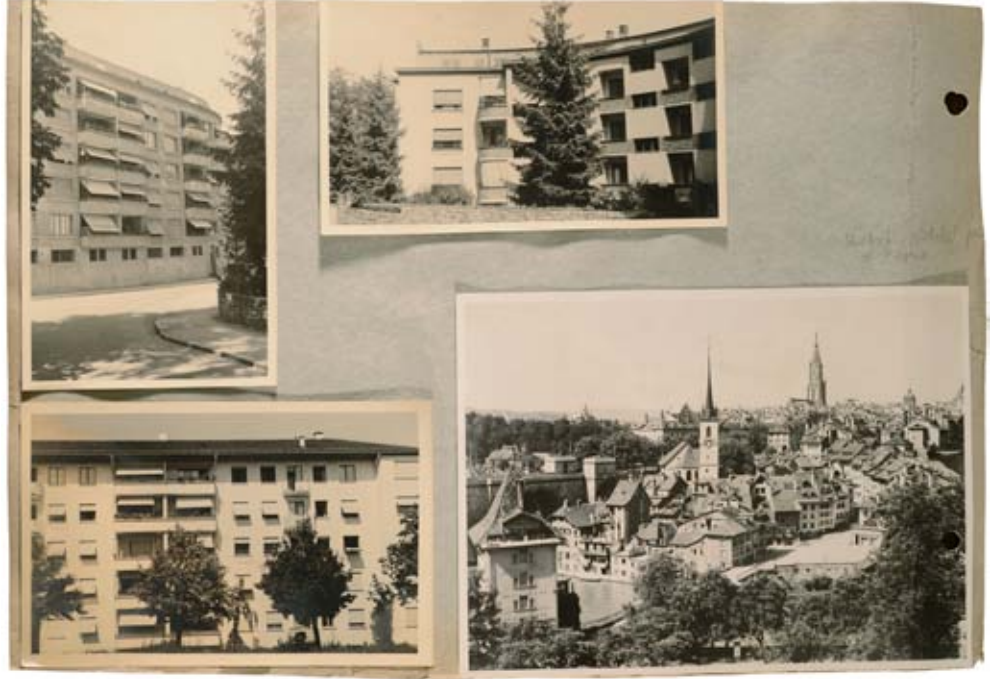
#### Endnotes

1. The Romberg Collection includes copies of:
  - Otto Rudolf Salvisberg 1937, (Julius Hoffmann Verlag, Stuttgart, 1937), an edition devoted to the Hoffman-La Roche administration wing.
  - Otto Rudolf Salvisberg 1935, (Julius Hoffmann Verlag, Stuttgart, 1935) includes a tuberculosis hospital in Bern, the distinctive heating plant completed at ETH-Z, and a large private house in Bern.
- Further publications documenting the wing designed by Salvisberg include:

1. Alexander Bieri, Robert Spreng and his photographs of O.R. Salvisberg's executive office building for F. Hoffmann-La Roche Ltd in Basel, (Editiones Roche, Basel, 2001) and Ruggero Tropeano & Walter Mair, 21/101, (Editiones Roche, Basel, 2010) which records in detail the large meeting room on the second level.
2. Frederick Romberg, 'Before Gromboyd: an architectural history', Vol. 1, 1986, typescript, Romberg Collection, RMIT Design Archives, 105b.
3. Between 2005 and 2009 the hotel underwent extensive renovations

- and additions by the international architectural firm of Renzo Piano. The construction was documented in, Nadja Athanasiou, *The Dolder Grand*, (Lars Müller Publishers, 2009).
4. Romberg, 'Before Gromboyd: an architectural history', 116.
5. Frederick Romberg, 'Australian Journey 1938', translated 1980 by Frederick Romberg, typescript, Romberg Collection, RMIT Design Archive, 3.
6. Romberg, 'Australian Journey 1938', 4.
7. Romberg, 'Australian Journey 1938', 5.







After five weeks at sea, Romberg's first experience of Australia was a stroll through the small town of Port Pirie which was permanently bathed in the sulphur coloured haze issuing from the lead works surrounding its harbour. As foreigners in a foreign land, Romberg's breeches, the latest in European fashion, drew some astonished looks from the locals, while his fellow passengers were amazed at the abundance of tropical fruit available in the local store. 'Home' however was never far from their minds as the newspapers were reporting the growing tension around the occupation of the former Czechoslovakia by German armed forces.

A tour of the harbour and lead works gave the passengers insight into what Australia held in store; what Romberg described as a common attitude: 'Everything in Australia is best, biggest or most beautiful in the world, or at least the southern hemisphere'.<sup>1</sup>

On 25 September 1938 the *Mosel* arrived in Adelaide, where Romberg was met by Dr Stratmann, a fellow passenger who had disembarked at Port Pirie. An Australian, Stratmann's father had emigrated from Germany some fifty years before. They took in the view of Adelaide from a nearby hill where, Romberg remarked: 'I noticed the endless lines of straight roads. Obviously the city had been designed on the drawing board, not grown haphazardly as so many in Europe'.<sup>2</sup> Returning to the *Mosel*, he was met by his fellow passengers who had taken the opportunity to visit the local synagogue where they had commemorated the Jewish New Year.

On Tuesday 27 September 1938 the *Mosel* followed the coast towards Melbourne, during which the boat was hit by heavy swells and icy winds. Although passengers stayed calm, singing German songs: 'a final goodbye to the past',<sup>3</sup> Romberg was aware that all remained preoccupied with the uncertain future of their homelands and plans for starting a new life in Australia. The following morning the *Mosel* travelled up the Yarra River to dock. Romberg disembarked with several other passengers who were dubious about the risk of continuing on an identifiably German ship.

From the port, Romberg was given a car ride to Flinders Street Station, in the heart of Melbourne's central business district, by a passing delivery man who made small talk about the impending War and the rise of Hitler. At the Station, he recalls seeing 'extra' editions of the newspapers reporting on the attempts by Britain, Italy and France to

negotiate Germany's continued occupation of the Sudetenland. Following negotiations, Germany recalled all ships, which would include the *Mosel*. Any passengers remaining on board would now be on their way back to Germany.

Having abandoned his hat at the Station as it identified him as a foreigner, but retaining his satchel the loss of which would have been too great a sacrifice, Romberg found accommodation in a rooming house in walkside St Kilda. With satchel in hand he walked from St Kilda into the city to call on his connection at the State Electricity Commission (SEC). Passing the Shrine of Remembrance and walking over Princes Bridge, he remembered the Victorian embellishment of the surrounding city made his satchel and the modern architecture it contained rather heavy.

Although not informed of Romberg's journey, the Chief Architect and the Chief Engineer of the SEC agreed to see him. The Chief Engineer appeared, at the least, half convinced of his abilities by the nude life drawings that had been included in the portfolio, but was ultimately dismissive of his architectural talents. Nevertheless, the Chief Architect encouraged him to submit a job application, but, perhaps out of misguided kindness, failed to inform Romberg that foreigners were disqualified from working within state authorities. Nothing came of his application irrespective of Romberg's academic and personal credentials and appealing nudes. Operating on a lead from the Chief Architect that Canberra offered vacancies Romberg departed for the national capital in mid-October 1938.

Before leaving he attended the Caulfield Cup horse race with his date, Evonne, the niece of a fellow guest at the rooming house, who had expressed distress at his lack of horse knowledge. While Romberg recognised that 'knowing about horses was part of the Australian way of life'<sup>4</sup> he admitted that betting improved the experience. One 'punt' was lucky enough to win a sizeable return, enabling them to celebrate at the St Kilda fun fair, Luna Park. Over the following fortnight Romberg visited Sydney and Canberra seeking work without success as the rules governing foreign workers applied.

On his return to Melbourne Romberg soon found a job with one of Australia's leading architectural firms, Stephenson and Turner which employed approximately forty architects plus technical staff. Amiable and social, he rapidly settled into his

new life in the busy practice and made friends.<sup>5</sup> At the same time Verena Sulzer, a fellow-student from ETH-Z, arrived in Melbourne and she and Romberg married. The chain smoking Verena was no shrinking violet, evidenced by her later actions in negotiations with a neighbour over a dispute about a shared driveway. Interestingly, Verena procured cigarettes from Justus Jorgensen who established the artists' colony, Montsalvat, in the bushland of Eltham.<sup>6</sup> In May 1939, Verena gave birth to a daughter Barbara. Sons, Thomas and Douglas, followed in 1940 and 1942 respectively, and their youngest daughter Irene in 1944. Hugo Leipziger, a fellow architect at Stephenson and Turner and fellow German who was about to leave for America, offered the Rombergs his furniture with which they furnished their first flat in Best Overend's Cairo apartments on Nicholson Street, opposite Carlton Gardens.

Although Romberg had some experience in practice, he was at a disadvantage when it came to his command of English, but had nonetheless decided from the beginning that both Verena and he would only speak English. In his memoirs, Romberg states adamantly: 'I was determined that the switch to our new homeland should be complete.'<sup>7</sup> Hence none of their children learnt German. The use of the imperial measurement system and unfamiliarity with the Australian construction industry were also early impediments, but encouraged by the firm and the social contact among his peers, he quickly mastered the new environment.

Impressed by the confidence of his portfolio, Stephenson and Turner made Romberg Job Captain for the Australian Pavilion at the 1939 New Zealand Centennial Exhibition at Rongotai on the Wellington foreshore. While the overall design was evidently by Stephenson, Romberg's contribution drew on his earlier work in the practice of Otto Salvisberg, including the design of the staircase in the Hoffman-La Roche office complex in Basel. However, in the prevailing political environment Romberg's German nationality prevented him from supervising the building's construction in New Zealand. For his efforts, he earned the appreciation of his colleagues George Philip, the Chief Draughtsman who observed the construction on behalf of the firm, and Mickey Morton who was responsible for the hand renderings of the Pavilion. Morton and Philips were best men at Romberg and Verena's wedding.

Romberg's work on the Australian Pavilion also earned the appreciation of Stephenson, who, on observing the construction of the main staircase in Wellington wrote to him: 'The staircase will look fine, and you were quite right in insisting that there should be no landing in its height.'<sup>8</sup> Romberg was offered a raise, and in appreciation he offered an introduction to Otto Salvisberg when Stephenson was next in Europe. Within six months of arriving in Australia Romberg had begun to make his mark on its architecture.

Endnotes

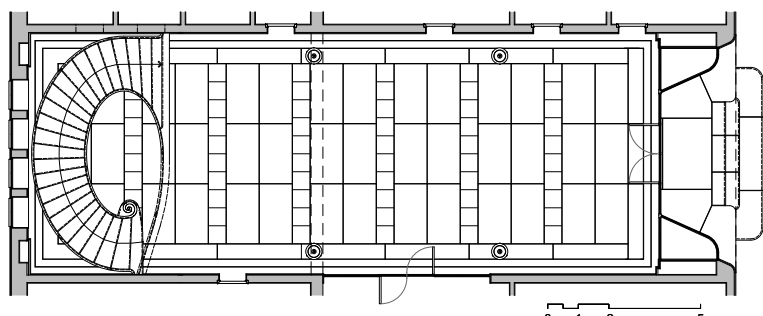
- 1 Frederick Romberg, 'Before Gromboyd: an architectural history', Vol 1, 1986, typescript, Romberg Collection, RMIT Design Archives, 132.
- 2 Romberg, 'Before Gromboyd: an architectural history', 135.
- 3 Romberg, 'Before Gromboyd: an architectural history', 136.
- 4 Romberg, 'Before Gromboyd: an architectural history', 149.
- 5 Stephenson and Turner had been effective since 1937, but was established from the dissolution of the architectural partnership of Arthur Stephenson and Hayman Meldrum which had been in operation since 1921. The Melbourne office was led by Stephenson while Donald Turner led the Sydney office.
- 6 Jorgensen was also a qualified draftsman having been articled at young age to his uncle the architect Robert Schreiber.
- 7 Romberg, 'Before Gromboyd: an architectural history', 161.
- 8 Romberg, 'Before Gromboyd: an architectural history', 160a.



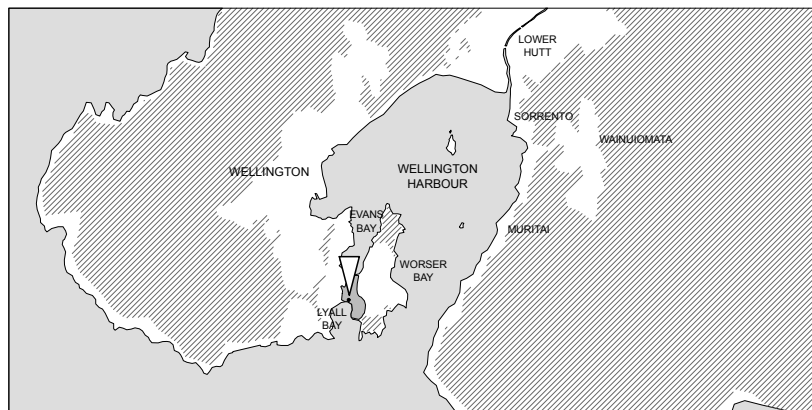
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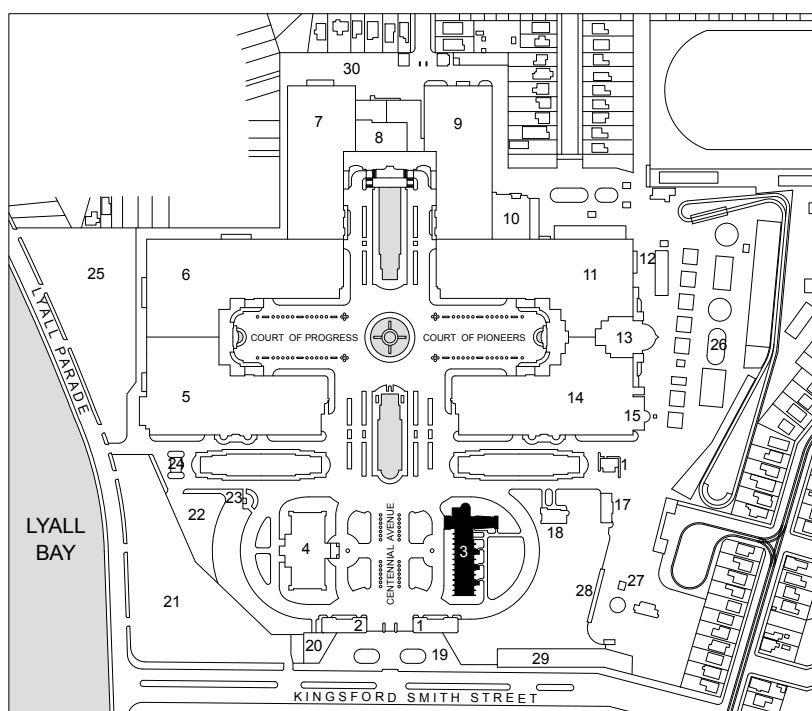
STEPHENSON AND TURNER, AUSTRALIAN PAVILION, 1939 NEW ZEALAND CENTENNIAL EXHIBITION, RONGOTAI, (DEMOLISHED) Drawings by Michael Spooner



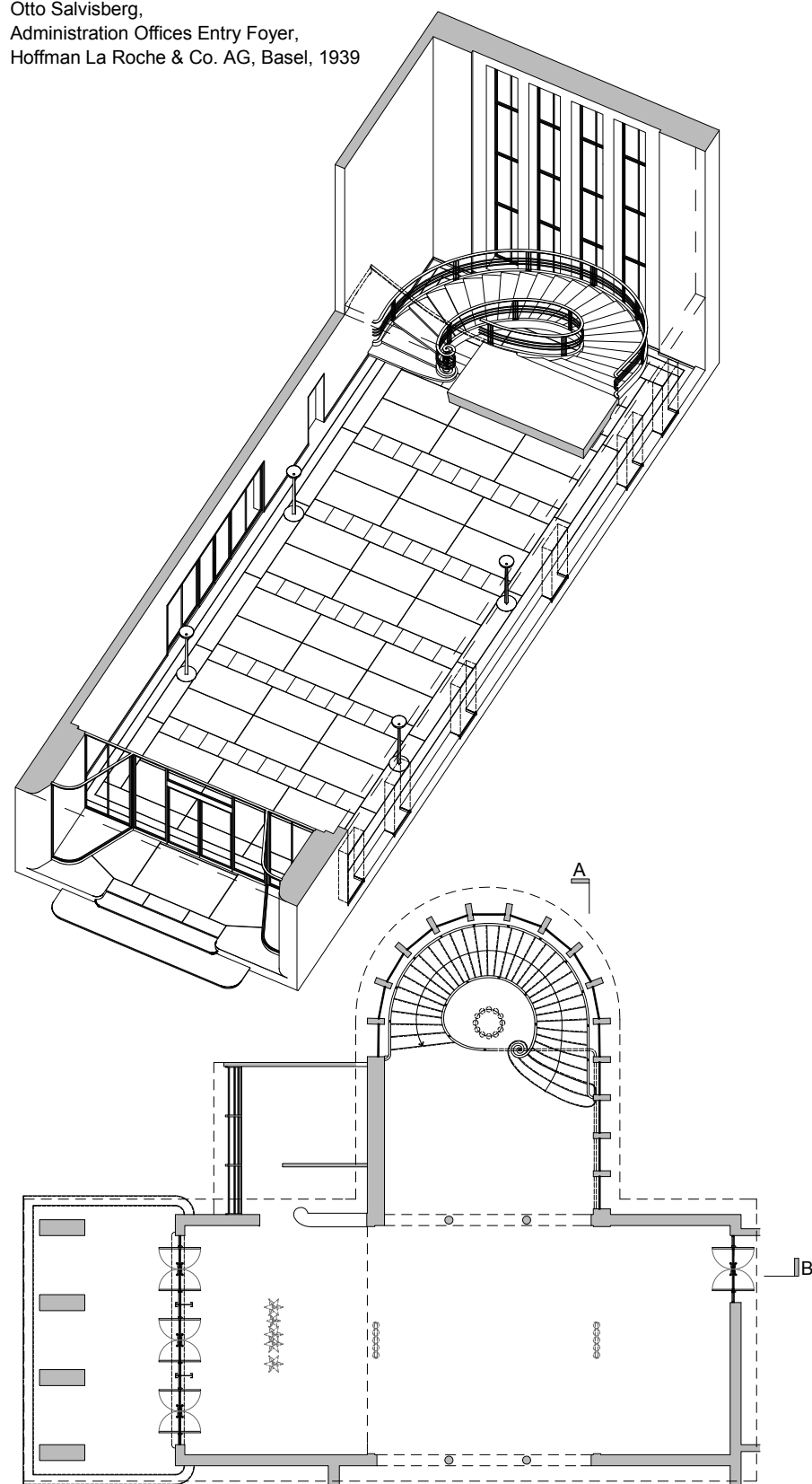
Otto Salvisberg, Administration Offices Entry Foyer, Hoffman La Roche & Co. AG, Basel, 1939



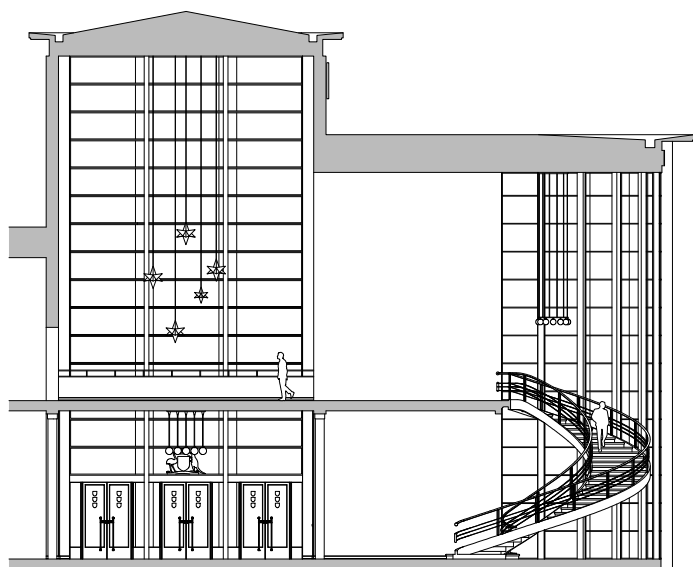
LOCATION PLAN



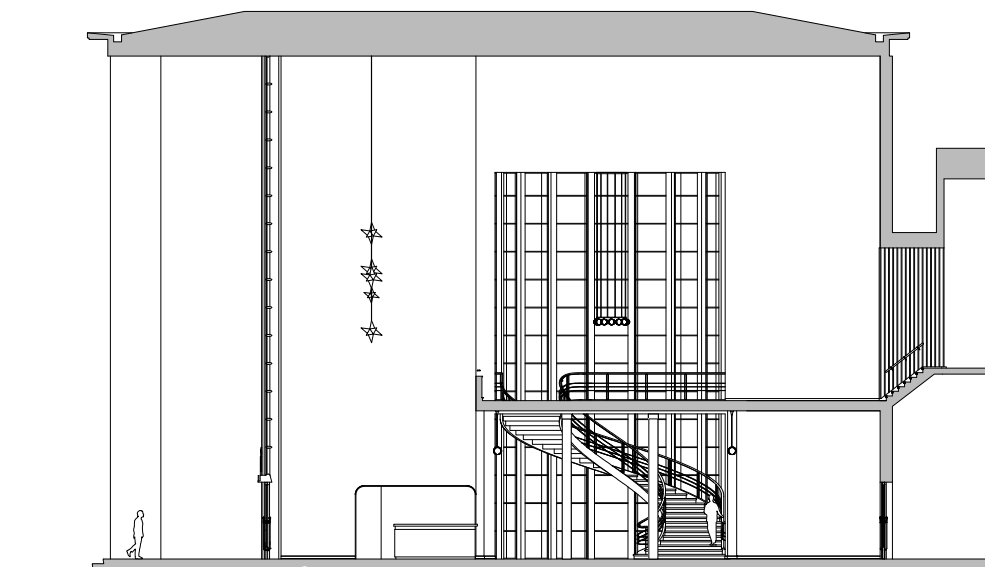
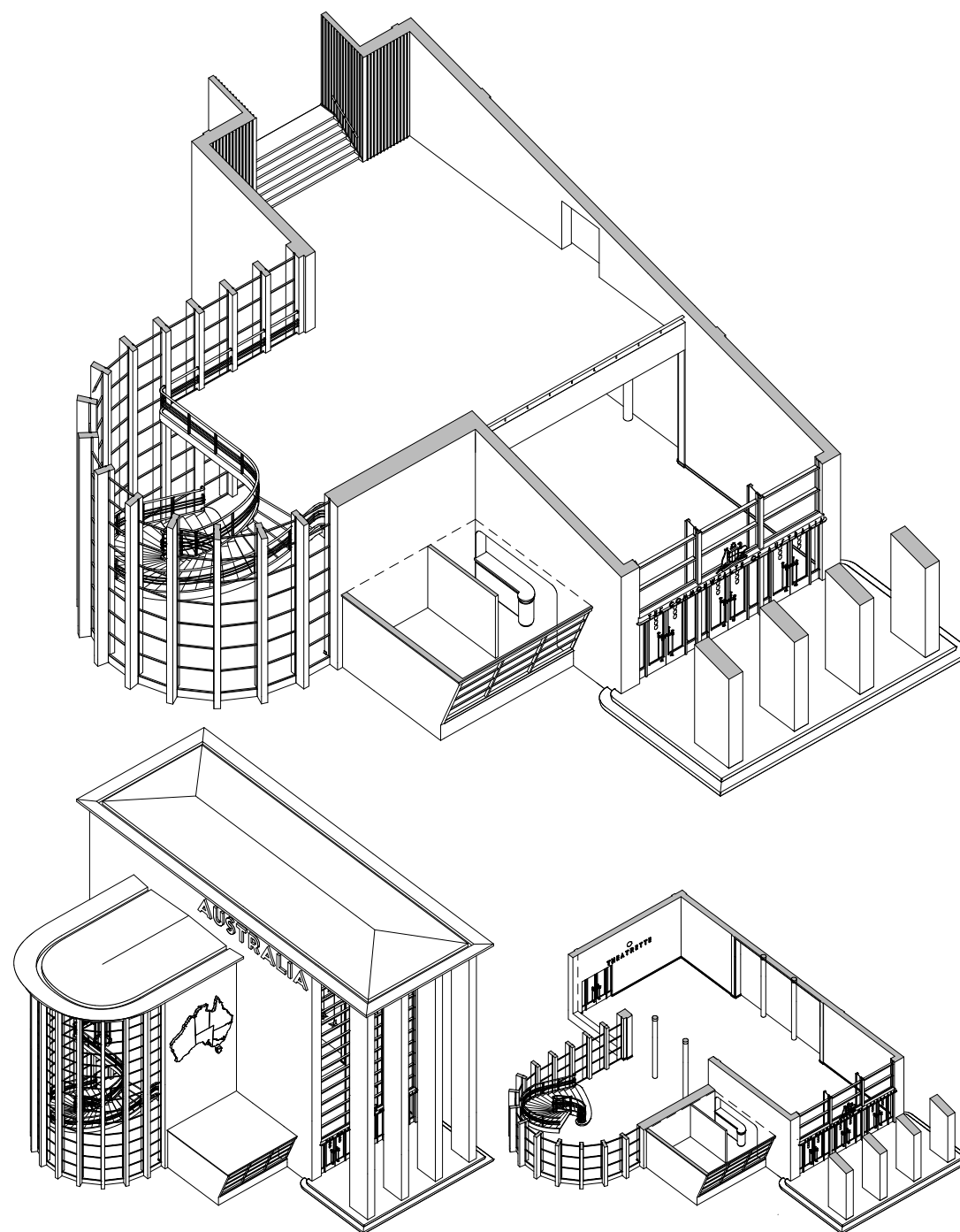
- |                                 |                              |                                 |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. Administration Block         | 11. Manufacturing Industries | 21. Public Carpark              |
| 2. Service Block                | 12. Hydroponic Display       | 22. Exhibitors Carpark          |
| 3. Australian Pavilion          | 13. Restaurant & Cafeteria   | 23. Anemometer                  |
| 4. United Kingdom Pavilion      | 14. General Exhibits         | 24. Port of London Authority    |
| 5. NZ Government Court          | 15. Tower of London Exhibit  | 25. Public Carpark              |
| 6. Motor & Transportation Court | 16. Plunket Pavilion         | 26. Playland                    |
| 7. Dominion Court               | 17. Creche                   | 27. Childrens Play Area         |
| 8. Tower Block                  | 18. Kindergarten             | 28. Station & Miniature Railway |
| 9. Engineering Court            | 19. A.A. Patrol Service      | 29. Taxi Stand                  |
| 10. Cabaret                     | 20. Cycle Park               | 30. Official Carpark            |



GROUND FLOOR PLAN



SECTION A



SECTION B





GLENUNGA FLATS  
Melbourne 1941  
Architect: Frederick Romberg



NEWBURN FLATS  
Melbourne 1939  
Architect: Frederick Romberg



**Top:**  
Romberg and Shaw  
Glenunga Flats  
Melbourne, 1941

**Middle Left:**  
Romberg and Shaw  
Newburn Flats  
Melbourne, 1939

**Bottom:**  
Frederick Romberg  
Hilstan Flats  
Brighton  
1939 (demolished)

**Middle Right:**  
Frederick Romberg  
Stanhill Flats  
Melbourne  
1943-1950



In 1940 Romberg began a partnership with Richard Hocking, a fellow employee at Stephenson and Turner, while still employed by the firm, a combined strain which made the partnership short-lived. Subsequently, Romberg left the practice and began a partnership with Mary Turner Shaw who had recently re-joined Stephenson and Turner after a stint overseas. This partnership lasted a year before Romberg established a solo practice.

He continued in solo practice until 1953, by which time joining forces with others was essential if he were to remain in operation. By then he had a record of work to his name and was in a position to choose partners who shared his architectural enthusiasms. The resulting enterprise with Roy Grounds and Robin Boyd, referred to as 'Gromboyd' endured until 1962 when Grounds left the practice to continue work on the National Gallery of Victoria. Romberg and Boyd remained in practice together until Boyd's sudden death in 1971.

Romberg's architectural output up to 1953 is notable for the number and quality of the multi-residential projects he proposed and completed in Melbourne.

Designed in 1939 Newburn Flats, Melbourne, was undertaken in part during his partnership with Shaw and was possible due to a sizeable financial wedding present from Verena's father, Dr Oscar Sulzer. This enabled Romberg to buy a mansion on Queens Road, with the intention to demolish the house to build apartments. This project began Romberg's long venture into property development and launched his reputation as an independent architect. Newburn, was an adaption of Newburgh, a town in Scotland, after which the original mansion had been named. The construction of the apartments - stripped concrete and formwork raised by steel shutters in two feet lifts, was new for Melbourne. Influenced by the Swiss practice of incorporating art works in buildings Romberg enlisted Gert Sellheim to design Aboriginal motifs for each entrance porch and a sun dial prominent on the façade. Although held up by shortages of building materials and labour due to war restrictions, Newburn was completed by early 1941.

Financially, the project was not a success, due to the losses incurred by the slow construction. Subsequently, Romberg invoked the penalty clause in the building contract. When the builder blamed the delays on the evident war shortages Romberg took heed of prudent advice not to take the

matter to court, instead negotiating a 'fair dinkum settlement' in the Australian tradition of flipping a coin to settle a wager. The builder promptly paid up.<sup>1</sup>

Glenunga Flats, Armadale, completed in 1940, was the last private commission executed by Romberg and Shaw before all building was stopped by war regulation. Glenunga was commissioned by the brother of Dr Paul Stratmann with whom Romberg had travelled on the ship *Mosel* on the voyage to Australia. The client imposed no restrictions on the design and Romberg would later cite the apartments as one of his favourites from this period.<sup>2</sup>

Glenunga clearly exhibits Romberg's debt to the International Style. The building shows a concern for natural light and subtle materiality in the form of delicate white render over brick that makes up the exterior walls, the timber and tile interior, and the striking stone rubble work of the anchoring chimneys. Influences of Swiss, Dutch and Scandinavian *Heimatsstil* are situated alongside playful elements such as a collection of porthole windows in the living areas, angled box windows in each bedroom, and conspicuously striped sun shades over the larger areas of glazing. Placing the building hard against the property boundary allowed Romberg to dedicate more than a third of the site to landscaped garden viewable from each of the four apartments.

A mood of uncertainty prevailed among émigrés since the outbreak of the War. A German neighbour had been interned in a camp and the Rombergs were worried about the welfare of their daughter who was technically Australian if they were to be interned. An initial fear of internment proved unfounded. Instead, they were required to report to the local police station once a week. When Paris fell to the Germans in 1940 they were prohibited from travelling, and had to surrender Romberg's prized Leica camera with which he had documented his boat journey to Australia, their radio and an old pair of binoculars. As a German national Romberg found himself treated with hostility and discrimination.

Stanhill Flats on St Kilda Road, Melbourne, were commissioned in 1943 by Stanley Korman the Director of the Centenary Woollen Mills which produced for the military. However, Romberg was only able to complete a sketch design for the maximum number of apartments allowable under the code before he was requisitioned by the Allied Works Council (AWC) and sent to Alice Springs

in the Northern Territory of Australia, over 2000 kilometres from Melbourne, to join the Civil Aliens Corps (CAC), and then on to Katherine, a further 1200 kilometres.

He joined Jewish refugees, Germans and Italians, and an Austrian Baron who had lost his title after World War I. From their isolated camp the internees were driven to a rocky outpost where they were made to move and break rocks to be used in the production of metal for the resurfacing of roads. The labour was enervating in the tropical heat, and commonly sustained injuries often became infected. Dysentery was a constant risk. On more than one occasion Romberg was hospitalised. These trips to the hospital offered respite, as the patients could watch films at night and were delighted with the attention of the few female nursing staff. Moreover, Romberg was not treated as an alien worker but as any other patient.

Eventually Romberg's architectural background resulted in a transfer to a better position in Alice Springs, in the care of Cyril Hudspeth, Chief Engineer for the Northern Territory. Hudspeth had worked as a structural consultant for a number of jobs undertaken by Stephenson and Turner, including the Australian Pavilion for the New Zealand Centennial. As well, he had been engaged by Romberg to consult on the Newburn Flats before his internment. Back at the drafting boards, Romberg was attached to the Deputy Resident Engineer as the Works Supervisor on a number of projects including the Royal Australian Air Force building at the local aerodrome. On one occasion he was invited by the chaplain, who knew Romberg's modest output of work in Melbourne, to present a lecture on architecture which was well attended by soldiers and public alike.

After the discovery of a theft of tools from the building site for which he was responsible Romberg found himself transferred to a tent camp near Larrimah, south of Katherine, where he was assigned clerical duties, and rather amusingly found himself responsible for keeping camp time by banging out the hours with an iron pipe on an old railway sleeper. Occasionally he attached himself to the Medical Officer on his rounds, revisiting his fascination with the profession that as a student in Europe saw him sitting in on various dissection and medical presentations.

Following his discharge from the CAC in August 1944, Romberg returned to Melbourne. Still under the edict of the Allied Works Council he began

work at the Victorian Public Works Department (PWD), under the supervision of Chief Architect, Percy Everett. In February 1945, three months short of the end of the European conflict Romberg was naturalised as an Australian citizen. He no longer had to report to the police and was free of restrictions that limited his movements; nor was he at the mercy of the AWC.

Free of obligations to the PWD, Romberg resumed the Stanhill project with Korman which had been interrupted in 1943. Andy Naumann, a civil engineer and fellow German immigrant, was appointed to take charge of the Stanhill venture on Romberg's recommendation. Naumann was an engineering graduate trained in Switzerland and Germany and married to a cousin of Verena. Concurrently, Romberg was working on Hilstan Flats in Brighton for Korman and his brother Hilel (hence Stanhill-Hilstan), which was completed in 1947, but demolished in the 1970's to make way for a road widening that was never to eventuate.

It was during this period that Romberg began to engage photographers such as Mark Strizic, Wolfgang Sievers and Herbert Fishwick to document his work. These relationships lasted throughout his career, documented in an album of work, which, together with a large number of photographs and proofs, form a part of the Romberg Collection.

#### Endnotes

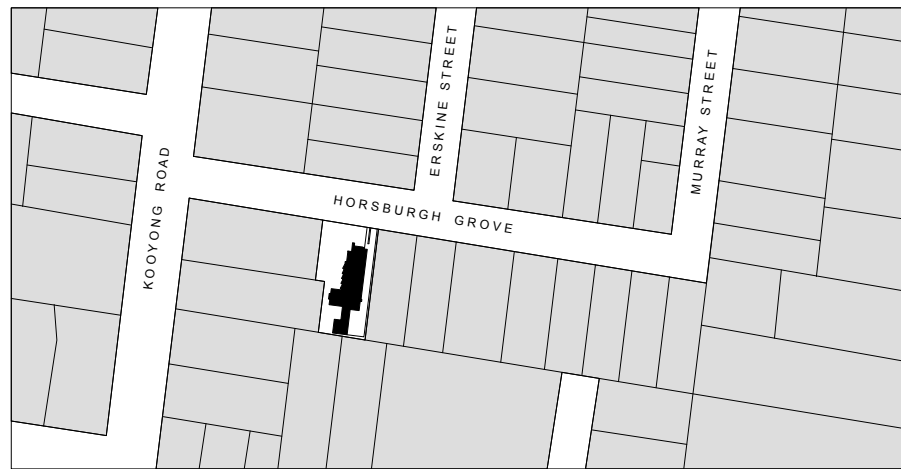
- 1 Frederick Romberg, 'Before Gromboyd: an architectural history', Vol. 1, 1986, typescript, Romberg Collection, RMIT Design Archives, 175-176.
- 2 Romberg, 'Before Gromboyd: an architectural history', 183a.



#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Frederick Romberg: an architectural survey is supported through funding from the Australian Government's Your Community Heritage Program.

ROMBERG AND SHAW, GLENUNGA FLATS, ARMADALE, 1940 (BUILT) Drawings by Michael Spooner



LOCATION PLAN

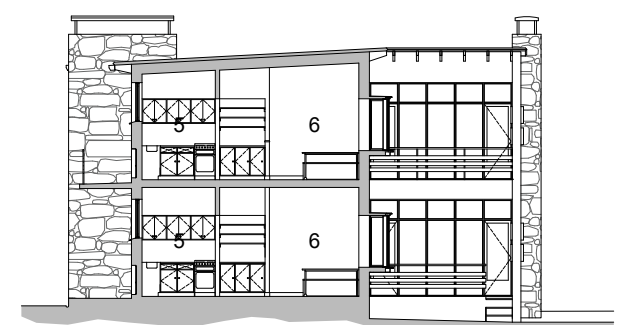


NORTH ELEVATION

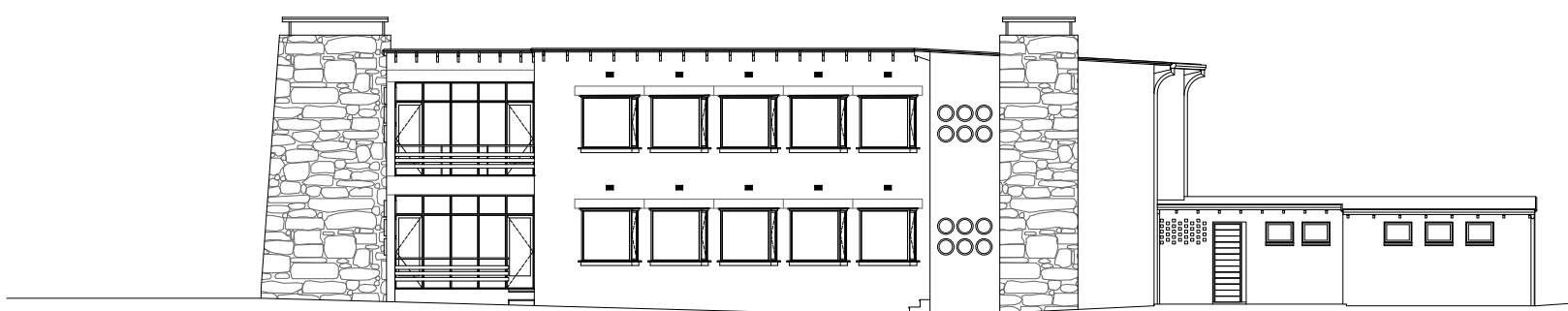
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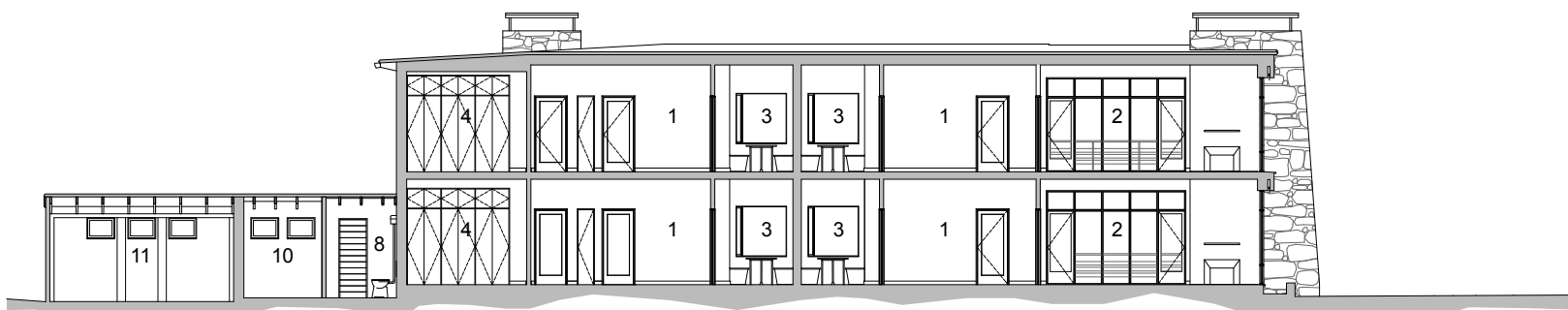


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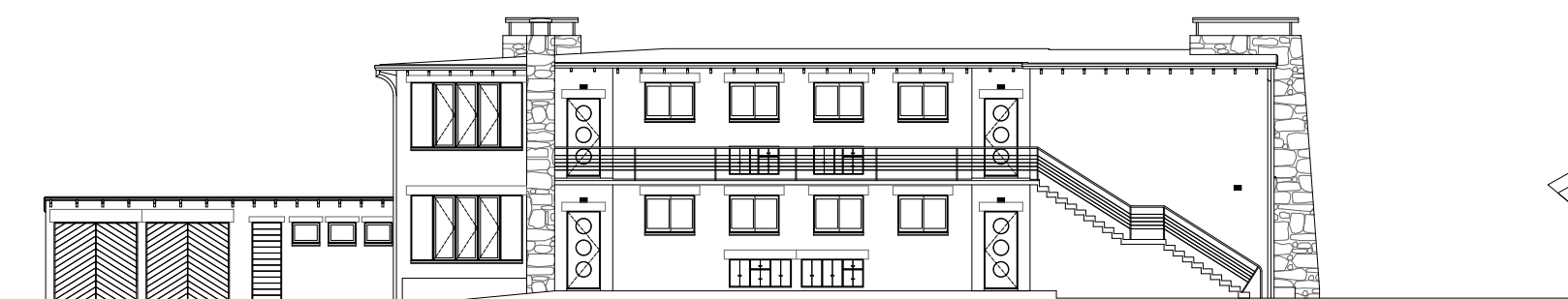


WEST ELEVATION

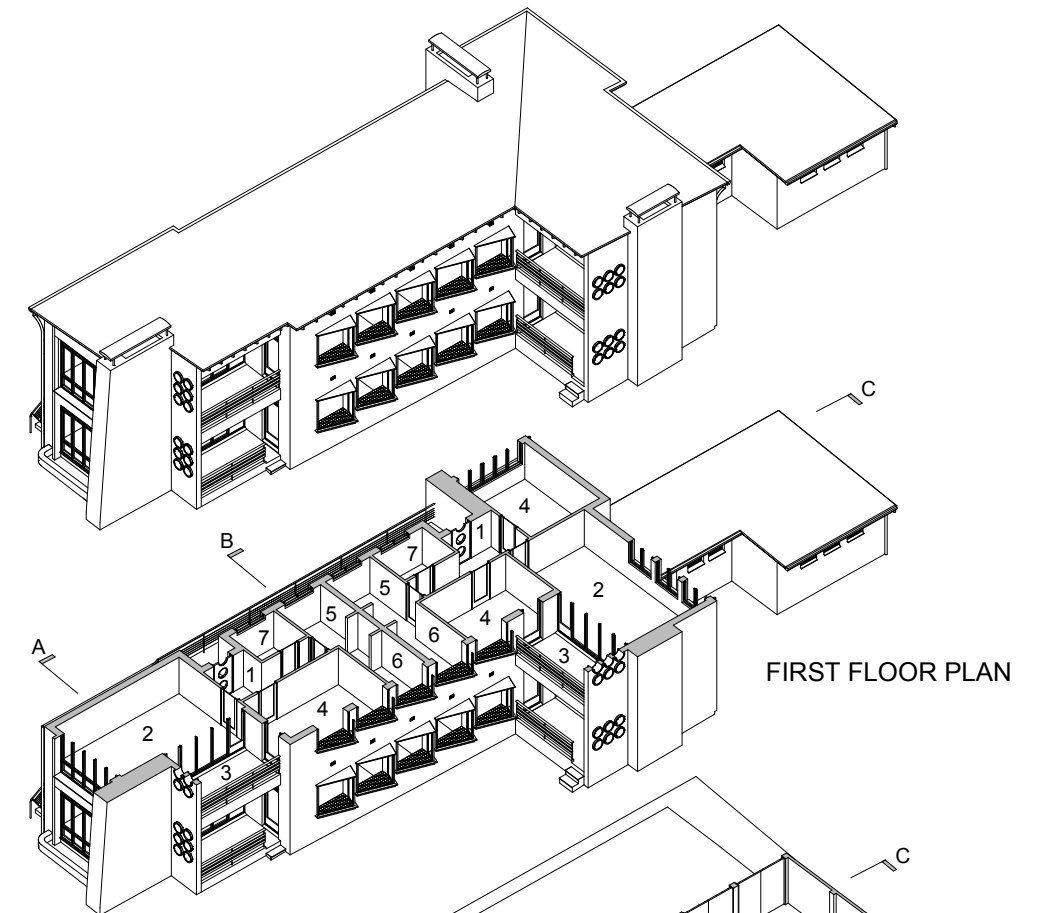
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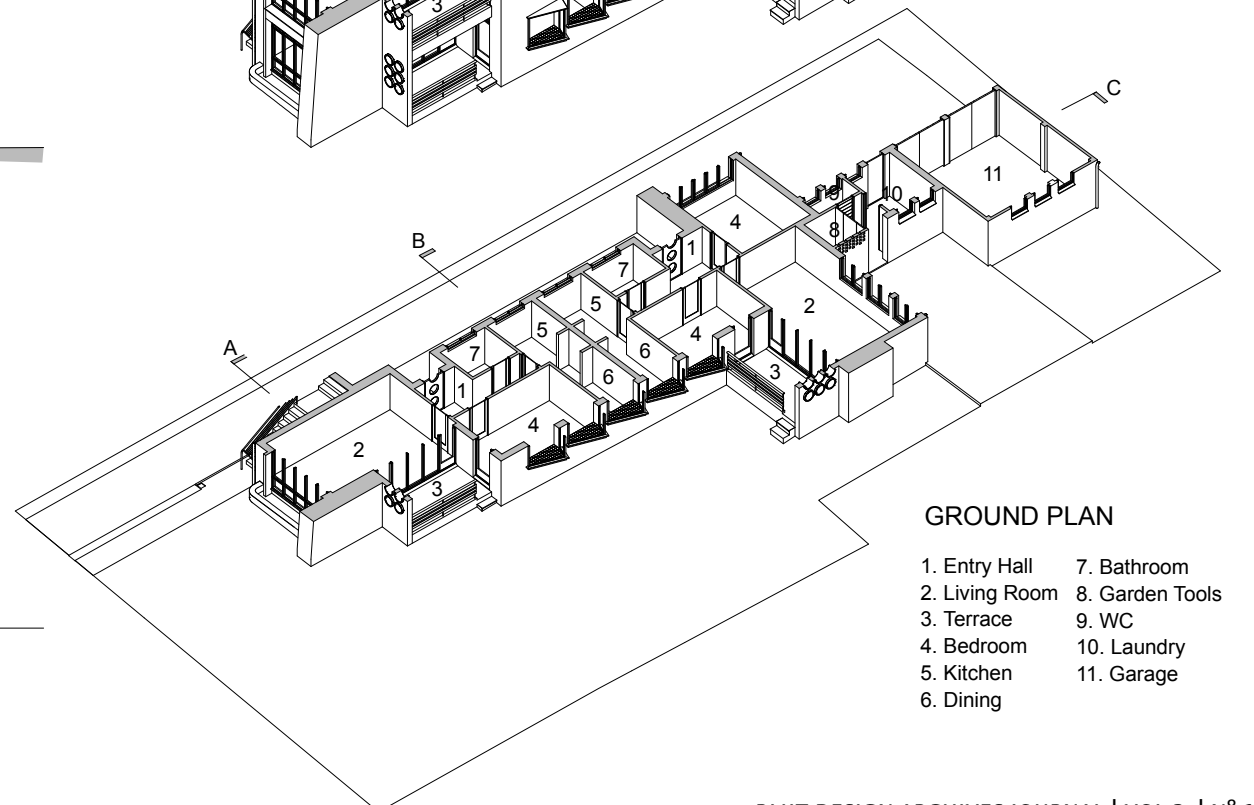
SECTION C



EAST ELEVATION



FIRST FLOOR PLAN



GROUND PLAN

- |                |                 |
|----------------|-----------------|
| 1. Entry Hall  | 7. Bathroom     |
| 2. Living Room | 8. Garden Tools |
| 3. Terrace     | 9. WC           |
| 4. Bedroom     | 10. Laundry     |
| 5. Kitchen     | 11. Garage      |
| 6. Dining      |                 |





Above:  
Frederick Romberg  
Romberg House  
Heidelberg, 1941



In 1941 Romberg purchased a section of land in Heidelberg, previously part of the Harlands Estate which had been subdivided by the architect Walter Burley Griffin. It was still 'just a paddock dotted with red gums and a few sparse houses scattered around it,'<sup>1</sup> but with views over the Yarra valley. Romberg designed and built two houses: one for his family and the other for sale. At this time, it was nearly impossible to obtain tenders for private builds, so he also took on the role of builder, and hired private labour. The family moved in on completion in 1942, and lived there for fifteen years until Verena and Frederick separated in the 1950s.

The Romberg House strongly reflects his early architectural training and interest in vernacular German and Swiss rural buildings. The house negotiates the slope of the site by providing an intermediate entry described by a wall of reeded glass panels. The upper floor contains bedrooms and a family bathroom, reached by a narrow, short flight of stairs from the entry foyer. A second, generous flight of stairs directs the visitor down to the lower level that contains the family living and kitchen area. The stair is notable for its balustrade and newel detailing, clearly reflecting a design in metal, but probably from cost or material scarcity was smartly made from timber. Timber-flooring, filleted wall intersections and door jambs along with more than ample natural light describe the interior volumes of the house.

From the living area opens a series of narrow French doors onto a patio partially covered by an elegantly curved timber deck extending from the upper storey bedroom. The exterior is described in a white painted brick, detailed exposed eaves, exaggerated curved downpipes, and a roughly hewn stone chimney that continues into the interior providing fire surrounds and mantel. The site below is described by coarsely terraced landscaping and includes the original timber garden shed that adventurously leans into the steep slope. Well proportioned, and bathed in natural light, the house was never sold during Romberg's lifetime and members of his family still lived there up until its purchase in 2011, after which it continued to be used by its new owners as a family home.

Romberg's development was not an unqualified success. Access to the adjacent properties was difficult, as the houses were completed well in advance of dual road access. Thus, Romberg's house shared with the adjoining property a narrow driveway, until such time as the future road was implemented by the council. Relations were strained due to the noise of the children of the family next door playing in the driveway and the arrivals and departures of numerous partygoers. A formed road, allowing separate access to the rear property was completed after the War and made sharing of the driveway unnecessary however the neighbors persisted in using it. Animosities thus simmered until Verena turned a hose on the neighbour's wife, thereafter the driveway remained firmly in the Romberg's sole control.

With the end of the War, Romberg headed to Europe in May 1946 with the intention of visiting his parents, and to call upon his father-in-law Dr Sulzer, in the hope of convincing him to provide the financial support for the construction of one hundred residential units at the corner of Spring Street and La Trobe Street in central Melbourne. The site had been bought in 1941 with the backing of Newburn Pty Ltd, the company Romberg had set up during the development of Newburn Flats, with the intention of growing his property development portfolio.

On board the ship to Europe, Romberg's travel companions included a former Governor of New Zealand attended by aides of high military and naval rank, a former German princess keen to reclaim her title, and war correspondent Alan Moorehead. However, Romberg found himself accommodated with ordinary folk: war brides, journalists and a few academics. During the long journey he became friendly with Israel Porush, Chief Rabbi of Sydney's Great Synagogue, who at Aden, on the tip of the Arabian Peninsula, organised a bus trip to the Wells of Sheba and a visit to a synagogue, the first Romberg had seen from inside, and which he confesses to being very much impressed by.

To Romberg's eyes Switzerland appeared largely untouched by the preceding years of war. In Zurich, visiting ETH-Z, he was happily surprised to be recognised by the attendant at the cloak counter of the University canteen, who also enquired after Verena. He also claimed the other half of the travel scholarship that had taken him to Australia by submitting his report entitled 'Australian Journey',

some eight years after his departure. Unfortunately, his visit to the Sulzers, while notable for a series of memorable dinners, did not achieve its intended aim and Dr Sulzer declined to get involved in the apartment project.

A subsequent visit to his parents in Harburg proved difficult as non locals were virtually prohibited from entry. It was only the Sulzers' connections that enabled Romberg to buy a four day train pass from Paris to Stockholm that took in Harburg. During the train trip, he was stunned by the destruction in Germany, in particular the decimation of central Cologne. Arriving in Harburg, which had also been ruined by war, Romberg endeavoured to contact his parents without knowledge of their whereabouts and they no knowledge of his impending arrival.

Romberg made his way to the central square of Harburg only to find the family residence had been destroyed in a bombing raid. The townhouse and medical rooms had previously been described by an enfilade suite of rooms and a rear garden with a magnificent copper beech. His family had survived and at the invitation of a local civil servant were staying at a small country mansion that had been requisitioned to house refugees fleeing the Russian occupation of East Germany. His step-father, Dr Riebeling, a formidable and popular man who had evidently earned the respect of his community, was allocated two large rooms at the mansion, housing the family as well as furniture and family treasures saved from the townhouse. Romberg arrived just in time to celebrate his mother's birthday.

Accompanying Dr Riebeling on his medical visits Romberg took note of the remains of the anti-aircraft placements, trenches and dugouts left by the German Army. During the War Dr Riebeling had run the military hospital in Harburg but denied any knowledge of the atrocities coming to light despite the Bergen-Belsen prisoner-of-war and concentration camp located not far away. Nevertheless, he asked Romberg for a character reference. As a senior army officer, albeit medical, Dr Riebeling was faced with investigation by the occupying British troops, and he was hopeful that a reference from a commonwealth citizen such as Romberg could work in his favour. Nothing came of the investigation.

Undeterred by his lack of financial success, but relieved at seeing his parents and journeying back to Europe, Romberg returned to Melbourne via America. The Spring and La Trobe Streets apartment project, the initial reason for his journey, lingered in the background until 1948 when the Commonwealth government announced the compulsory acquisition of the land, by which time Romberg had turned his attention to other projects.

Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Frederick Romberg, 'Before Gromboyd: an architectural history', Vol 1, 1986, typescript, Romberg Collection, RMIT Design Archives, 184a.

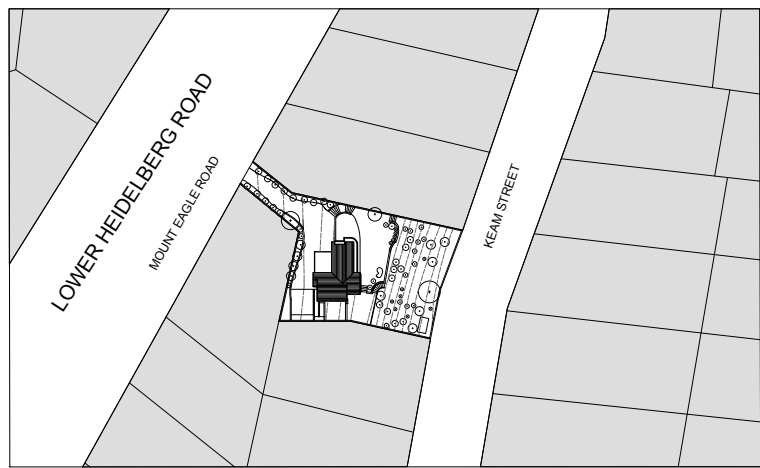


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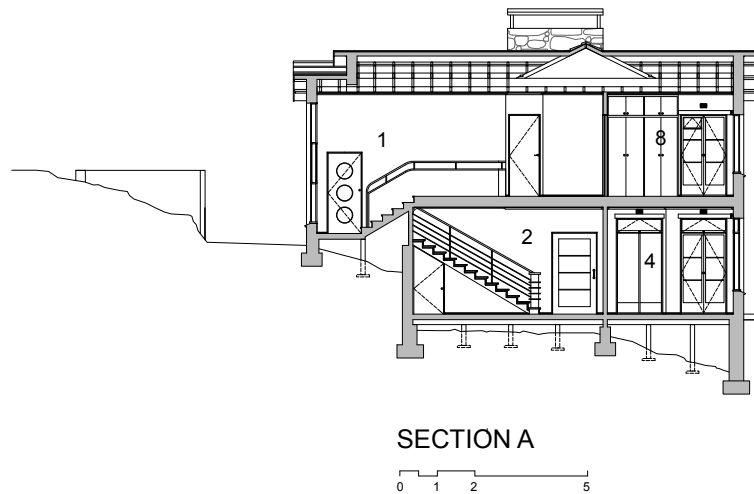
Frederick Romberg: an architectural survey is supported through funding from the Australian Government's Your Community Heritage Program.

The RMIT Design Archives thanks Zoe Edquist and Mark Douglass for the opportunity to view the Romberg House.

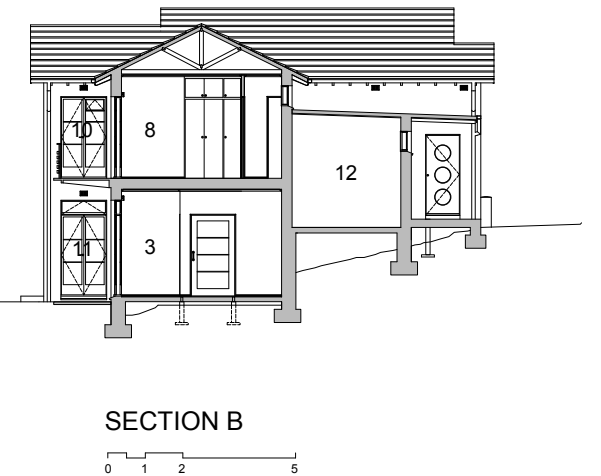
FREDERICK ROMBERG, ROMBERG HOUSE, HEIDELBERG, 1941 (BUILT) Drawings by Letó Melanie Tsolakis and Michael Spooner



LOCATION PLAN

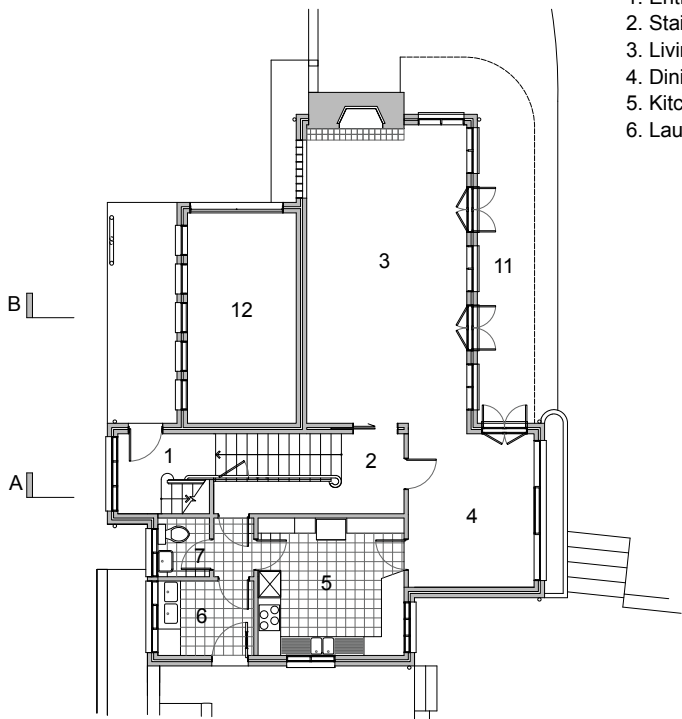


SECTION A

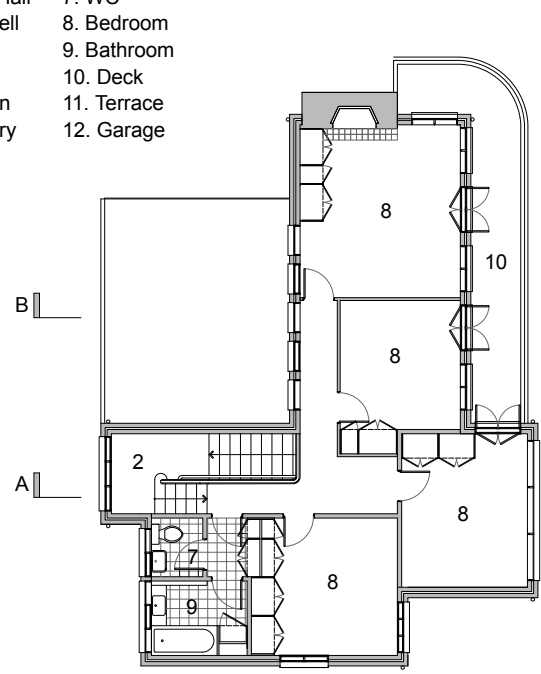


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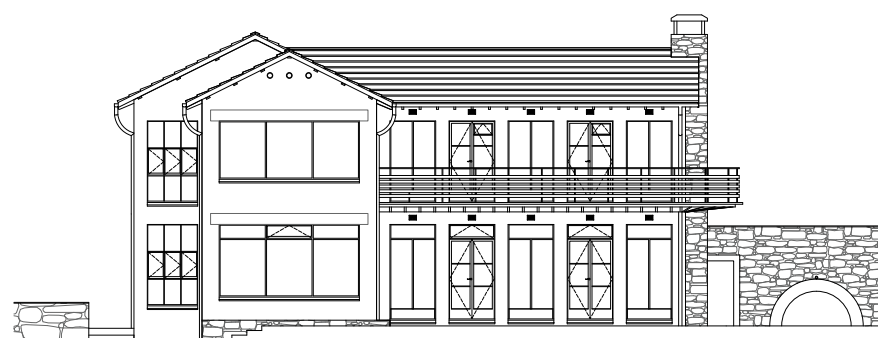
- 1. Entry Hall
- 2. Stairwell
- 3. Living
- 4. Dining
- 5. Kitchen
- 6. Laundry
- 7. WC
- 8. Bedroom
- 9. Bathroom
- 10. Deck
- 11. Terrace
- 12. Garage



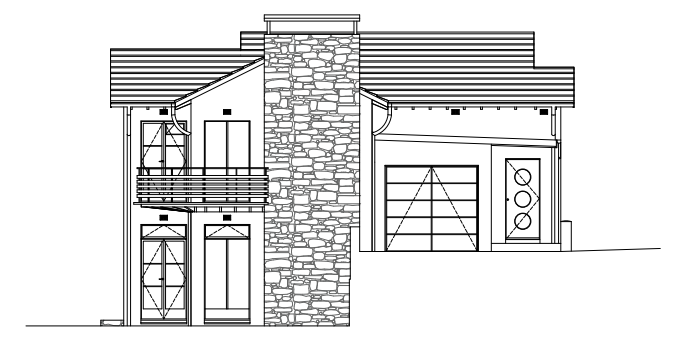
ENTRY & LOWER LEVEL FLOOR PLAN



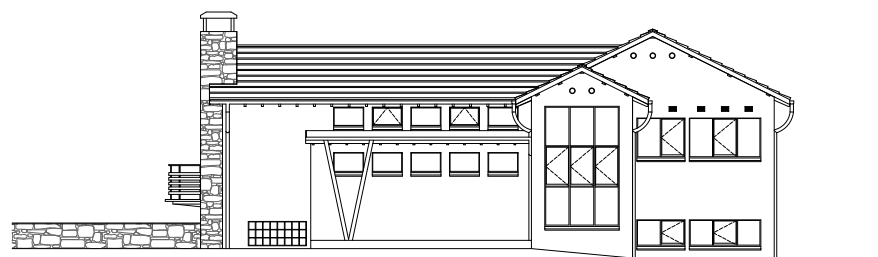
UPPER LEVEL FLOOR PLAN



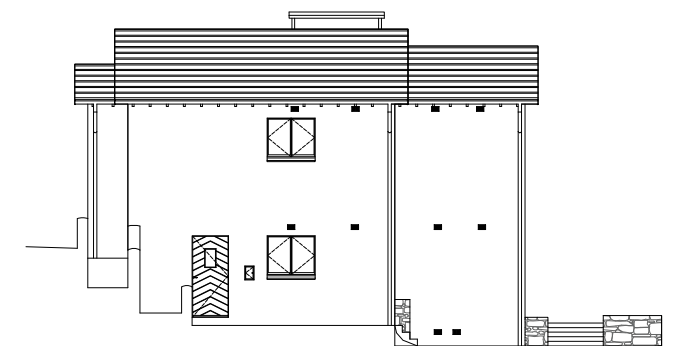
EAST ELEVATION



NORTH ELEVATION



WEST ELEVATION



SOUTH ELEVATION

