

CHAPTER 02

1950S CITY BUILDINGS



Chelsea House, Flemington
Road, North Melbourne
PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBIN GIBSON 2018

The 1950s is the decade that redefined Melbourne. The city was in flux but a spirit of modernism was alive as developers, architects and home-builders embraced new technology and ideas that would equip the community to face the tasks of managing an increasingly car-based society, expanding commercial activities, relocating industry from the inner suburbs, while preparing for the 1956 Olympic Games. Existing building types were re-designed and new building types (often faced with glass and steel) emerged to meet changes of approach. The central city remained low-rise, with height limits still in place, which restricted structures to no higher than 40.3 metres (132 ft). Why this height? Originally, it was all about fire control. In 1914, when this limit was imposed, it was the height of the fire lookout tower in East Melbourne, and was the maximum height that fire brigade ladders and water-pumping systems could reach. At the time Melbourne had a population of about 600,000, land values were considerably lower, there were not a lot of motorised vehicles on the road, lift technology was primitive and unsafe, and fire-proofing of buildings was in its infancy. But even as the city grew, the height limit remained and was zealously maintained by the Melbourne City Council, much to the chagrin of architects such as Marcus Barlow, who, in 1932, would design the Manchester Unity Building. Addressing his colleagues at Royal Victorian Institute of Architects in December 1930, he pointed out that risks in lifts had been minimised by new technology, buildings were now subject to codes of fire-proofing and the equipment available to the Fire Brigade was substantially improved. Skyscrapers in the USA, which had started to reach the sky from the mid-1880s, had been shown to reduce traffic congestion by grouping allied businesses together or near to each other. Tall buildings, to Barlow, were 'a natural evolution' of architecture and should only be constrained by the laws of economics.¹

And yet, 20-something years after Barlow's presentation, height limits remained in place despite the fact his arguments increasingly made sound sense—in the city centre, at least. Lift systems demonstrated improved efficiency and safety and the sheer number of city workers meant increased pressure on land use. As the city continued to look upwards, it had its gaze fixed on the overseas centres of architecture, particularly the USA, where the International Style was increasingly dominating city skylines. The International Style was characterised by a radical simplification of form, a rejection of ornament, and adoption of glass, steel and concrete as preferred materials, with construction facilitated by industrialized mass-production techniques.²

The rage was all for glass curtain walls. But what WAS a curtain wall? In broad terms, the principle of the curtain wall was that it was neither a loadbearing component of the building



United
New
York
PHOTOGRAPH
BY
LEWIS

nor a system of infill within the framing elements, but a screen hung over the face of the structural frame.³ They could be defined as thin, usually aluminium-framed walls, containing infills of glass, metal panels, or thin stone. The framing was attached to the building structure and did not carry the floor or roof loads of the building.

In 1950 the architectural world was fixated on the new United Nations Secretariat building in New York, a massive rectangular slab of glass of 40 stories, emanating from a 'Board of Design' led by Wallace Harrison and including luminaries such as Le Corbusier, Ernest Cormier, Oscar Niemeyer, Julio Vilamajo, and Guy Souleux from Australia. How was the style being evaluated? In November 1950, *Architectural Forum* asserted that the UN building "has supplied a monumental symbol for the United Nations; it had provided a fine example of the free-hanging glass-and-metal curtain wall; it had given an impressive demonstration of the power of technology to control climate; it had proved that architectural collaboration (even among

¹ Marcus Barlow, 'Building Regulations and the Desirability of Increasing the Heights of Buildings in Melbourne', *Journal of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects*, March 1931.

² Henry Russell Hitchcock, Philip Johnson, *The International Style*, W. W. Norton & Co., 1957.

³ Miles Lewis, 'Pleated Windows & Curtain Walling', www.mileslewis.net/australian-building/pdf/08-melcsls/8.10-melcsls-windows.pdf



Otis Building,
by DANIEL

determined individualists) was not impossible". Importantly, it had resulted in a worldwide rush for the construction "of gleaming towers faced with metal and glass". It had demonstrated advances in acoustic technology, lift equipment (by the Otis Elevator Company), fireproofing, office layouts, air-conditioning systems, sun proofing and interior venetian blinds, and lighting fixtures and controls.⁴ Two years later the New York skyline was further enhanced with the classic Lever building on Park Avenue, which generated almost universal acclaim and brought international attention to the architects, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (SOM), a firm that would later have an effect on Melbourne when they collaborated with local architects on a series of prominent office buildings.

City Office Buildings

Melbourne had a bit of a wait before it could join cities such as New York and Chicago to demonstrate something of a parallel economic recovery. Local designers were quick to learn from their US counterparts, via trade magazines or visits to the USA, but developers had to overcome resistance from established building trades and local planning authorities, who were

forced to revise requirements for items such as city ceiling heights and floor-area ratios. Some significant buildings emerged in the city in this period, and, by the end of the 1950s, Australian technology in the use of lightweight construction systems was cited as second only to America.⁵ Designers of new Melbourne buildings soon realised that the treatment of the sun and the need for adequate cooling and ventilation in usually sealed buildings would be paramount in later decades, if not the 1950s. Early mechanical systems were not always reliable in provision of adequate comfort levels⁶ and external sun protection was rare, although shading devices such as heat-resisting glass, blinds, glass fibre curtains and double-glazing would become commonly used, as well as horizontal structural shading, vertical blades, egg-crate sun-breakers, and screens. These buildings were generally simple, rectangular forms with sleek, glazed facades, often irrespective of orientation, such as Gilbert Court in Collins Street (1954/5). With their antecedents in the milder northern hemisphere, they would possibly present challenges in dealing with sun control for Australian conditions. However height limit controls that were still in place until the late 1950s meant that new buildings were not really very tall, and had only restricted areas of glazing. It was argued that "the problem of sun control did not present itself and specific shielding systems were rare" Down Under in this decade.⁷

By 1953 Melbourne was making tentative steps towards multi-storied office buildings expressed as glass-walled towers, despite the antagonism towards tall buildings expressed by the Melbourne City Council. A new 'height-limit' building (eight floors and two basement levels) was erected for H. C. Sleight in Queen St, designed by Bates Smart & McCutcheon (BSM) in 1953.⁸ However Professor Philip Goad, from Melbourne University, noted in his 2004 history of BSM that the building showed none of the use of wartime prefabrication or advances in building construction. It was an infill structure with double-hung aluminium windows and a demure gridded facade bordered by terracotta faience; it seemed, aesthetically, to belong in the 1930s.⁹ It was perhaps the last building designed by BSM before their skyscraper period.

The years of 1954/5 were pivotal for building in Melbourne city. After seemingly condemned to minimal building activity forever, all suddenly changed, with many major works under way and several more in advanced planning. New designs were beginning to emerge after a long hibernation. According to *Cross-section*, the influential architectural magazine first published at Melbourne University in November 1952,¹⁰ the New York influence was becoming apparent,

5 Jennifer Taylor, *Tall Buildings*, 2001, p. 15.

6 Jennifer Taylor, *Tall Buildings*, 2001, p. 43.

7 Jennifer Taylor, *Tall Buildings*, 2001, p. 114.

8 Heritage Alliance, *Survey of Post-War Built Heritage in Victoria*, 2008, p. 19.

9 Philip Goad, *BATES SMART: 150 Years of Australian Architecture*, 2004, p. 157.

10 *Cross-section* was introduced as a monthly newsletter designed to keep architects and master builders informed about current Australian building and was published by the Department of Architecture, University of Melbourne. It ran for 277 issues and ceased in March 1971.



while other developers and architects used experimental techniques in what amounted almost to a new idiom of city design. The approach was wary, unprovoking, unexciting, but sounder than any popular movement of the past; it was an Australian-looking compromise within the glass envelope, a logical expansion to urban size and character of the generally more simple and rational post-war development in smaller suburban buildings.¹¹

The curtain wall design was at the centre of change. The honour of being the first curtain wall building in Melbourne has been claimed by a number of designers, and establishing the chronology is fraught, as comparisons need to be made of design/building permits/construction/completion. However, it is likely that the first came from the industrial world—the intriguing Boiler House, built for Australian Paper Manufacturers (APM), on Heidelberg Road in suburban Alphington. It was under construction in 1951 (to a design by Mussen, Mackay and Potter) and was likely to have been designed in 1950. Purpose-built to contain boilers and turbines, the large curtain-walled building rose to a height of five storeys. The metal-framed panes of glass were vertical in proportion. Described as made of structural steel, clad only in glass and a little aluminium, fans were used to supplement the boiler's own forced-draught to circulate air up the tower to keep operatives' temperatures down.¹² Regrettably, despite being included on the Victorian Heritage Register, the Victorian government decided in 2016 that it should be demolished and replaced with housing, with the Planning Minister, Richard Wynne declaring, "The old power station is an eyesore, a relic of the past and needs to go."¹³

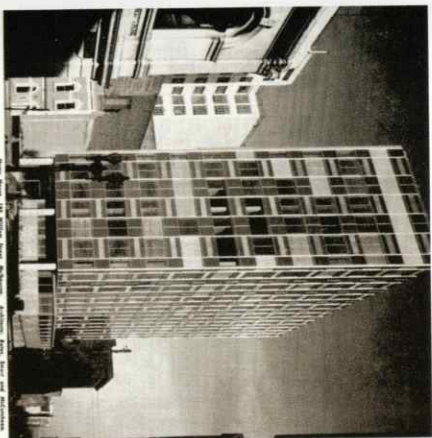
The first curtain-wall building proposed for the central city is likely to have been the Alliance Assurance Co. (an English firm) at 408-10 Collins Street, designed by Leith and Bartlett and Partners in 1954. It featured a double-skin, all-glass front, surmounted by a track for cleaner's suspension and framed with an aluminium surround. Importantly, with so much glass, it was air-conditioned—a necessity, as the windows couldn't be opened. According to *Cross-Section*, it had the most attractive glass front yet displayed on a Melbourne street, due to finesse and simplicity—and was described as having an "eminently washable" face. The glazing was of English Vitra-slab, a sandwich of heat-resistant outer glass, plain inner glass and a plastic film between with a transparent tint, used as spandrel or window.¹⁴ The triple sheets overcame the potential for expansion cracks and assisted heating control (the front faces east and south). The 100 per cent conditioning of air supply was done with filters, humidifiers and washers at roof level and temperature conditioners at each floor in a slim bulkhead over toilet blocks.

¹¹ *Cross-Section*, No. 18, April 1954.

¹² <http://vnhd.heritagecouncil.vic.gov.au/places/103746>; *Cross-Section*, No. 24, October 1954.

¹³ *The Age* online, 27 October, 2017.

¹⁴ *Cross-Section*, No. 52, February 1957. Spandrel panels are typically horizontal panels spanning between two vertical supports.



An architect chose Laminex . . .
An architect chose Laminex as a working for prefabricated wall panels and partitions on all floors in this new Melbourne building . . . Hume House. Colour and pattern used were Grey Laminex. Laminex was chosen for its strength, durability, and ease of installation. Laminex was chosen for its strength, durability, and ease of installation. Laminex was chosen for its strength, durability, and ease of installation.

Advertisement, Hume House, William Street, 1958.

The window-cleaners' davits that peeped over the top could be swivelled out of sight.¹⁵

Various forms emerged for curtain wall buildings. Most were finished in sheets of glass, but panels of aluminium started to make their mark late in the decade. One of the most prominent curtain wall buildings was the new Hume House, at 185 William Street, by BSM (1957). Sitting on a corner, it featured horizontal alternating window glazing and was probably the first curtain walled building lit from all four faces to be erected in Melbourne.¹⁶ It featured a T-shaped plan and used the service block tower (concrete encased) for rigidity. The steel frame was bolted with high tensile steel, and the floors were pre-cast concrete tubs. The builders were able to proceed without orthodox building permits because of innovations in structure and fireproofing. The wind-break entrance lobby traversed on stairs that rose across an ornamental pool and all the interior pre-fabricated wall panels and partitions were surfaced with Laminex, regarded as hard to harm and long-wearing. Much altered, it was eventually demolished in 2006.

Although the curtain wall would provide a new aesthetic for Melbourne buildings, many architects, engineers and building owners expressed concerns about the finish. Extensive testing was often carried out to reassure the professionals and the general public. The 1960 design for the new Shell Company headquarters, (Buchan, Laid & Buchan, Melbourne, in conjunction with Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, USA) included construction of a sample of curtain wall, 12 m (42 ft) high by 5 m (18 ft), which was stood up behind a Convair airliner at Essendon aerodrome and tests made with rain-loaded wind up to 160 kmh (100 mph).¹⁷ The doubters would later be proven to have been accurate in their scepticism, as sections of glass detached from some buildings, most notably ICI House.

One of the first multi-storey glass box buildings in Australia to express the new international aesthetic was Gilbert Court at 100 Collins Street (John la Gerche, 1954/5). The reinforced concrete frame building, on a corner block, displayed similarities with the UN building, with a front façade and east elevation composed of aluminium famed glazed curtain walls. It became symbolic of the recovery in commercial building in Melbourne after WWII. Completed in ten months, at 12 storeys it was still limited by the height restrictions in Melbourne and was

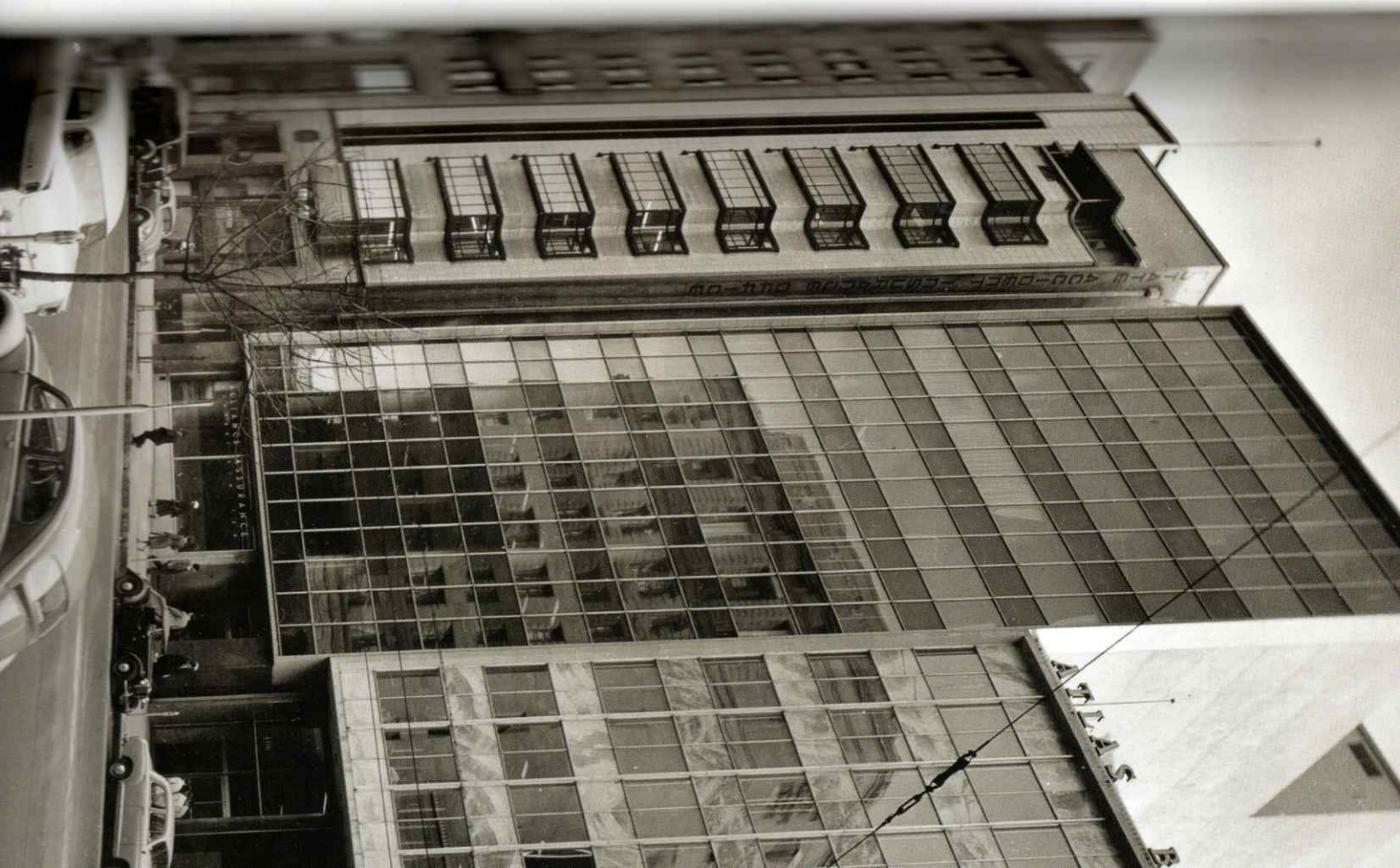
PICTURED OPPOSITE
Alliance Building, 408
Collins Street

PHOTOGRAPH BY WOLFGANG
SEIFERT, 1959. PICTURES
COLLECTION, STATE LIBRARY
VICTORIA.

¹⁵ Cross-Section, No. 28, February 1955.

¹⁶ Cross-Section, No. 51, January 1957.

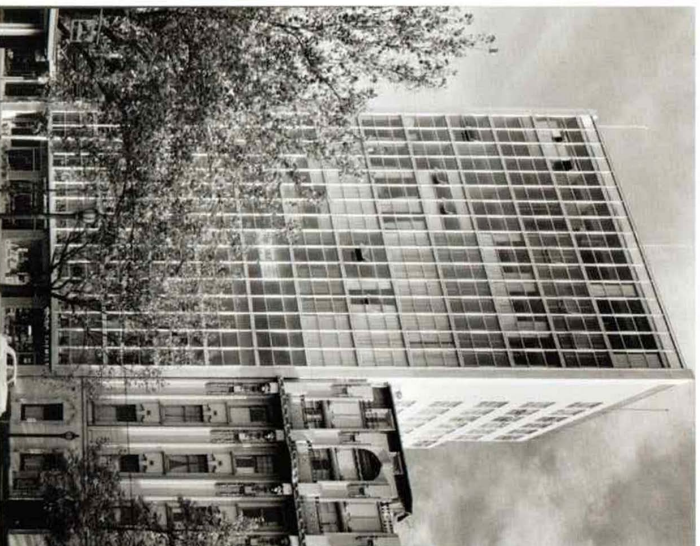
¹⁷ Cross-Section, No. 82, August 1959.



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TOP LEFT
Gilbert Court,
100 Collins Street
PHOTOGRAPH BY
WOLFGANG SEIFERS, 1957,
PICTURES COLLECTION,
STATE LIBRARY VICTORIA



TOP RIGHT
Coates Building,
20 Collins Street
PHOTOGRAPH BY
WOLFGANG SEIFERS, 1958,
PICTURES COLLECTION,
STATE LIBRARY VICTORIA

hardly a building that would transform the city, even if other buildings followed in a similar vein. But it was its design and materials that made it important, not its height. It aroused strong feelings—if this was the future of buildings, many Melbourneans were not happy with what they were seeing, with artist Norman Lindsay denouncing it as “a final triumph to modernistic art, with its slogan of death to all beauty.”¹⁸ Not surprisingly, architect Robin Boyd countered with a comment that some people found this “new sterile simplicity, as refreshing as a glass of iced water.” Like it or not, the new aesthetic was ready to conquer Melbourne’s business district, even if the adventure did not last long due to poor thermal and material performance, such as poor weather-proofing and glass panels falling off buildings and landing on the streets below. When Gilbert Court was constructed, the fire codes requiring fire-retarding spandrels between floors had been relaxed, allowing a wall of glass. Thankfully, for this early experiment, the aqua-coloured glass spandrels remain, together with the largely intact ground-level shopfronts.

Gilbert Court was followed by the Coates building, a 13-floor, height limit, steel-framed, glass-fronted office block on the north side of Collins Street, near Spring Street. Designed in 1956, and completed in 1959, it was a young brother, in several senses, to Gilbert Court, and both earned the title of Glass House, in a technical sense as well as a popular one, by being remarkable for the absence of the traditionally expected upstanding fire-retarding spandrels between floors.

¹⁸ Robyn Anneor, *A City Lost and Found* 2014, p.113.



Allans, 276 Collins Street
 PHOTOGRAPH BY
 ROBIN GRON, 2016.

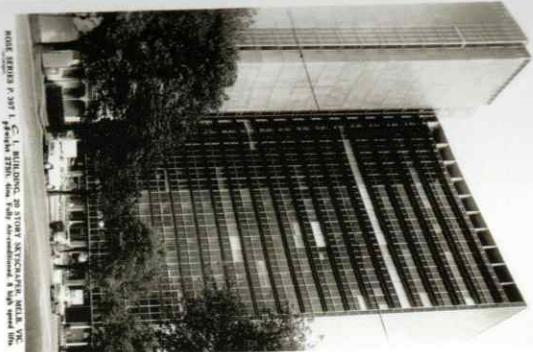
The Coates building was served by two high-speed gearless lifts and a geared lift for passengers and goods, all of which went to the flat roof which was available for tenants, who could take in an uninterrupted view of Melbourne's rooftops while enjoying a lunch-time sandwich in the sunshine. Anticipating the advent of television—to come to Australia in November 1956—provision was made for tenants to plug in television sets to a central antenna, and heating was provided from coils bedded in the concrete floors. Because many tenants were members of medical profession, plumbing ducts were incorporated on all the main internal columns. The ground floor consisted of seven shops and the entrance lobby featured walls sheeted in rigid stainless steel, with an enamel coating (similar to surfaces of stoves), a luminous ceiling and a waterfall in contoured stainless steel and plexiglass, regrettably no longer there.¹⁹

Construction commenced in February 1958 and the steel frame construction enabled the building to be completed in 17 months, two months ahead of schedule. The frame included pre-cast concrete floor units, meaning that work was able to proceed on the lower floors with absolute safety to the workmen while steelwork was still being erected on the upper floors.

Both were designed by the firm of architect John La Gerche²⁰ who had visited America to study the latest trends in this type of construction before plans were completed. One outcome

¹⁹ *Architecture and Arts*, August 1959.

²⁰ *Cross-Section*, No. 85, November 1959.



ICI HOUSE, 1959
PORTLAND ROSE SERIES,
COLLECTION, STATE LIBRARY
VICTORIA

was the use of rigidised stainless steel (both inside and outside the buildings) which attracted a lot of attention—imported from the USA, it was believed to be the first time it was used in Australia.

At the other (western) end of Collins Street, on the corner of Market Street, a major change occurred in 1959 when plans were announced for the replacement of the Western Market with a large building for National Mutual Insurance Co. One of Melbourne's few island sites (a block bounded by four streets), the 27-storey block would be constructed in 1965 and would occupy the entire former market site.

Other modernist designs were arriving in Melbourne, including the colourful Allans Music Store at 276-278 Collins Street Melbourne, by Godfrey & Spowers, Hughes Mewton & Obb. Following a fire in 1955, the 1957 replacement building certainly stood out in conservative Collins Street. The office and retail building

was distinguished by a slim concrete frame containing a glazed curtain wall with bright red metal spandrel panels. In a similar colourful style, London Assurance Insurance Co. at 470 Bourke Street, was constructed of steel and reinforced concrete in 1959 to a design by Bernard Evans and Associates. The nine-storey building incorporated lightweight building techniques with open web floor beams that were fire protected by vermiculite fire ceilings.²¹ The main entrance provided spacious entries to two groups of insurance offices as well as a lift lobby servicing the upper floors. Finishes included travertine faced walls with green marble and gold ceramic tile panels, marble covered stairs and floors and an illuminated ceiling, and the building was equipped with the latest automatic duplex collective control elevators.²²

But it was in Queen Street that most building activity was occurring; the strip was threatening to be another Collins Street. Insurance companies were still financing new buildings, both for their city headquarters and as lettable office space. Notable was a new building for Norwich Union Life Insurance, a British firm establishing their own organisation in Melbourne in 1957. The 13-storey building (Norwich Union House) in Queen Street, designed by Yvonne Freeman, was distinguished by a street façade that featured white vitreous enamelled steel panels.²³ Next door, at 43-51, York Chambers was demolished in 1957 to make way for a new steel framed and reinforced concrete building with aluminium window frames and coloured spandrel sheets, for the Union Insurance Society of Canton, designed by BSM. What a handsome pair they made in Queen Street!

²¹ Vermiculite spray is a lightweight coating that provides very efficient fire resistance with minimal thickness to structural steel, concrete frames, metal floor and roof decks.

²² Architecture and Arts, April 1959.

²³ Architecture in Australia, October-December, 1958.

Sub-Basement:
Air conditioning plant, electrical sub-station, main switchboards, standby diesel generator, archives and store; storage; workshop; recreation room.

Basement:
Car Park for 65 vehicles.

Ground:
This is mainly an open garden area, with limited parking for visitor's cars. Enclosed areas are: Entrance Hall, Theatre, Bank of N.S.W. branch, Kiosk.

1st Floor:
Distribution section of Commercial Services Dept. Credit & Collection section of Chief Accountants Department. PABX telephone switch room. Clerical office of Bank of N.S.W.

2nd Floor:
I.C.I. Offices and Conference Room.

3rd Floor:
Tenants Offices.

4th Floor:
BALM & Tenants Offices.

5th Floor:
BALM Offices.

6th Floor:
Tenants Offices.

7th Floor:
ICI Offices.

8th & 9th Floors:
ICI Offices and Conference Room.

10th Floor:
I.C.I. Offices.

11th Floor:
ICI Offices, Central Library, Staff Library, Fibres Showroom and Central Mailing Room.

12th & 13th Floors:
I.C.I. Offices.

14th Floor:
I.C.I. Drawing Offices.

15th Floor:
I.C.I. Personnel Dept., including — Medical Officer's suite, Female Staff rest rooms.

16th Floor:
I.C.I. Offices.

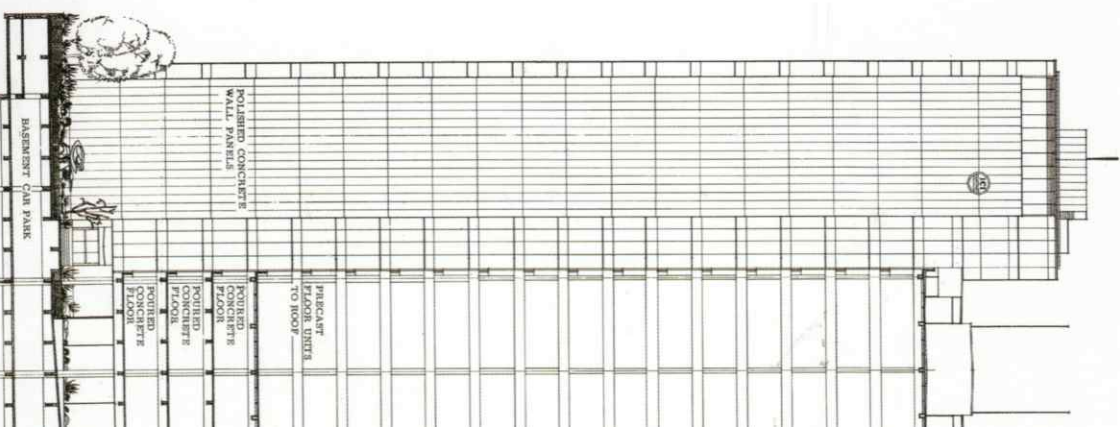
17th Floor:
I.C.I. Directors' Suites and Board Room.

18th Floor:
Kitchen and Staff Cafeteria. Caretaker's Flat.

The Tower Block:
Rising to 22 stories on the north side of the building, the tower block contains lifts, stairs, air-conditioning ducts and toilet blocks. The three topmost stories contain lift machinery, heating and cooling plant, and air-conditioning fans.

ICI HOUSE

Floor planning



ICI HOUSE, MELBOURNE.
North-South Cross Section
LOOKING EAST



Height limits on buildings were still in place in the early 1950, but everything was about to change. 1955 saw the lifting of post-war limits on building materials and the floodgates were opening as a series of high-rise offices emerged in the city. A new era in Australian building was about to erupt, led by a building on the fringe of the city that would be the first to exceed present height limits. The proposed new Melbourne office block for Imperial Chemicals Industries (ICI), on the corner of Nicholson and Albert Streets in East Melbourne, was planned to tower 22 storeys.

At 70m (230 ft.) it significantly exceeded the Melbourne limit of 40m (132 ft.). The architects, again, were BSM, who planned the development with open ground space and a 12m (40 ft.) setback for cars and garden. The Buildings Regulations Committee of the MCC had the power to modify the regulations in certain cases, and the Committee was apparently swayed by the layout in approving the application.²⁴

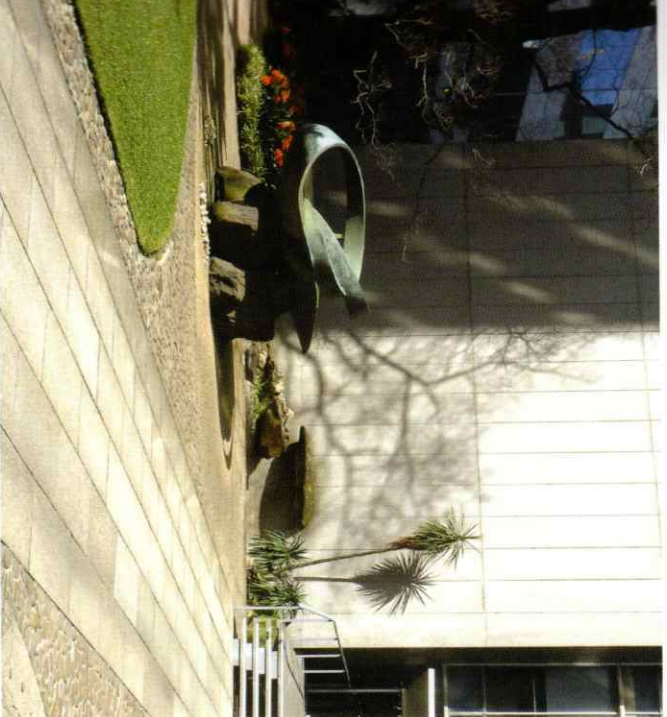
The committee granted the requested height—75 per cent above the normal Melbourne limit—in view of the amenity afforded by the setback. The open space at ground level as a garden—designed collaboratively by BSM, sculptor Gerald Lewers and landscape architect John Stevens and based on a similar feature of the Ministry of Education and Health (1936) in Rio—that enabled the height limit to be broken.²⁵ These features were enhanced by a sculptural element at the entrance by prominent sculptor Tom Bass, also responsible for sculptures at the Colonial Mutual building (corner Elizabeth and Collins Streets) and Wilson Hall at Melbourne University. The building was raised on pilotis (built-up columns of steel faced with marble and Italian glass mosaic tiles) and the blue-glazed linear slab of open plan glass offices, with its lift core expressed as clearly separate, changed forever Melbourne's previously consistent skyline. The lead architect, Osborn McCutcheon of BSM, utilised a lot of the expertise in prefabrication he had gained working with American forces during WW1. During construction, floor units, beam encasements, concrete spandrels, panels of the east and west walls and the synthetic granite panels enclosing the service tower were all fabricated off site.²⁶ An important forerunner of the ICI building (now Orica House) was Hume House in William Street, where techniques were tested and adapted, altered and rejected, including the installation of contemporary abstract sculpture in the surrounds.²⁷ Although the ICI building was highly regarded, problems soon emerged with its facing material of glass. On the west wall several glass panels cracked and fell onto the pavement below. Although no pedestrians were hurt, many were outraged at the possibility and a timber canopy was built

²⁴ Cross-Section, No. 34, August 1955.

²⁵ Philip Good, *BATES SMART: 150 Years of Australian Architecture*, 2004, p. 175.

²⁶ Gleeson Hojiri, 'Melbourne's bold leap upwards: the inside story of Australia's first skyscraper', *Guardian*, 7 September 2016.

²⁷ Claire Newton, 'Peeling through new glasses: Hume House as a model for ICI House', in A. Leach et al. 'Formulation Fabrication, the Architecture of History', 17th Annual Conference of SAHANZ, Wellington, New Zealand, 2000, pp 197-204).



over the Nicholson Street footpath to protect pedestrians. Reactions to this safety move ranged from the great concern expressed by ICI officials through to press headlines and even ridicule. After the wife of a politician was hit by falling glass, *The Age* (February 8, 1962) ran the headline "M.L.A.'s Wife Hit by Falling Glass", while *The Sydney Morning Herald* (on the same day) reported the incident as "71st Pane Crashes From Melbourne Building". However, the events were no joke to many members of the architectural profession who took it as a serious warning against indiscriminate use of large glass areas on curtain walls without the benefit and availability of thorough local investigations and research reports into all problems of cladding.

The ICI failures spotlighted many basic problems relating to solar radiant energy penetration and steps being taken by glass manufacturers, fabricators and glaziers to solve them. Cracking of tinted glass had been a common occurrence in buildings for quite some time, but the imported toughened glass used in the ICI building was expected to answer this problem. C.S.I.R.O. reports indicate the cracking of the glass was due to microscopic impurities that remained undetected during manufacture (in Belgium), and which became the focus of internal strain under intense solar radiation. When the sun shone on the centre portion of the panel, the edges remained in comparative shade. Uneven stresses developed within the panel and resulted in cracking—a problem that became even more serious when sun protective louvers cast deep shadows on different parts of the same sheet. Because of its low heat absorption, use of light-tinted glazing was suggested as one answer. Another remedy was restricting the present liberal use of glass

cladding which would, no doubt, help to reduce enormous loads on air-conditioning plants (estimated at 40 per cent of the building's running costs). The immediate answer to the problems at ICI House was to remove 700 glass panels on the west wall and spray the exposed concrete behind with a blue-pigmented plastic,²⁸ reported in *The Age* on 14 May 1962 as "I.C.I Takes Glass Down".

The precinct containing the ICI building was enhanced in 1959 by the huge block designed and constructed by the Commonwealth

Government on the corner of Spring and Latrobe Streets, directly opposite ICI. Consolidating the workplaces of dispersed Commonwealth public servants, the 12-storey block, of steel-framed construction, paid attention to the possibility of attack and included additional civil defence precautions, such as columns and beams encased in concrete and a first-floor slab designed to take the debris load of floors above.²⁹ In 1955, on the north-west fringe of Melbourne, in Flemington Road, North Melbourne, young architect Harry Ernest, then just 27, designed an innovative modern office building called 'Chelsea House' in 1957, one of the first freestanding curtain-walled office blocks in Melbourne. After graduating, Ernest worked with Stephenson and Turner before establishing his own practice in 1955. Only five years after being named as Melbourne University's outstanding fourth year student, he became one of the youngest ever to design and see constructed a building of such size as Chelsea House. It attracted much public and professional interest, mainly because of its great expanse of glass (30,000 ft or over 9,000m). Most of the tinted heat absorbing glass in aluminium window frames was made in Belgium and England and was only available in two colours—black or dark blue. In an interview in 2008, Ernest ruefully admitted that although he personally preferred the black glass, his client had demanded the blue—a split-second decision that would have resulted in a building of rather different appearance.³⁰ Another highlight of Ernest's new 'glasshouse' was the tile pattern on each floor. Ernest wanted a flooring that allowed free movement of partitions to vary office sizes without destroying the floor design, was easy to install and maintain, resistant to wear, and obtainable in the desired tones.³¹ The cost of construction was low, despite the curtain walling, mainly because it was constructed by a local contractor with a comparatively small organisation (and overheads), no emphasis was placed on a time schedule and few of the access difficulties found on city sites.³²



²⁸ Cross-Section, No. 116, June 1962; Cross-Section No. 98, December 1960; Cross-Section No. 74, December 1958.

²⁹ Architecture and Arts, February 1959.

³⁰ <https://www.alicomos.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/UnlovedModernism-Paper.pdf>

³¹ Cross-Section, No. 42, December 1957.

³² Architecture in Australia, June 1959.

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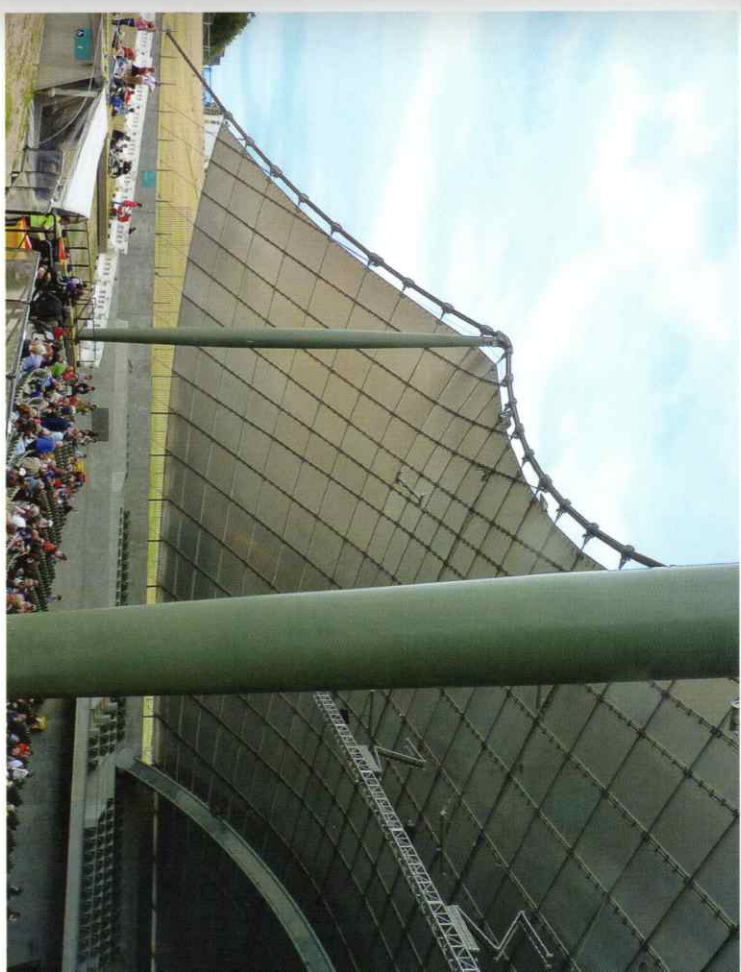


Opening night, Sydney Myer
Music Bowl, Melbourne, 1959
PHOTOGRAPH BY WOLFGANG SIEVERS
ACCESSION NUMBER H2000.196.173
PICTURES COLLECTION
STATE LIBRARY VICTORIA

The exciting and turbulent decade of the 1960s saw upheavals to the worlds of music and clothing, adolescent fervour, youth rebellion, and changes in mass culture. There was the 'space race', as the USA and the USSR competed to put astronauts into space and ultimately onto the moon, and the Vietnam war. It was also a decade that saw the emergence of the entity referred to as "the media", combining entertainment, information and commercial advertising and soon to be all-encompassing across society.

Although challenges to authority and the established order were breaking out and generating tensions, life continued without dramatic change for many people in Melbourne, even if many buildings in the urban streetscape around them were undergoing transformation. In 1960, the editor of *The Age* commented on the fact that the people of Melbourne could hardly have missed the extraordinary changes in the appearance of the city. The skyline is new, he commented.¹ Perhaps when Melburnians looked up, they paid more attention to the helicopters on their way to Essendon airport from the new heliport on the Yarra than the proliferation of new, tall buildings. But they certainly would not ignore the number of modernist classics that arrived in Melbourne during this decade, including the Sidney Myer Music Bowl, the National Gallery of Victoria, the Southern Cross Hotel, the AMP and BHP buildings, major suburban shopping centres at Chadstone, Northland and Southland, Domain Park apartments in South Yarra and new office buildings for government—State, Commonwealth and local. It was also a time when buildings that would later be known as Brutalist began to appear. Brutalism referred to architecture that openly exposed its structural and material elements. Buildings were made of concrete, brick or steel, and nothing should conceal the materials used, how everything held together and what purpose everything served. Melbourne has some fine examples of Brutalism. In many cases they represented the move away from buildings finished with 'curtain wall' designs that were prevalent in the 1950s.²

The decade commenced with the opening of one of Melbourne's modernist showpieces—the Sidney Myer Music Bowl, the culmination of a dream of one of its most illustrious citizens of the 1920s and 1930s. Sid Myer had built a retail empire, centred on his Bourke Street store, but unfortunately died from a heart attack in 1934. His vision, beyond retail dominance, was to provide a free, large venue for outdoor music for the people of Melbourne. As it turned out, his family (via the philanthropic Sidney Myer Charity Trust) made it a reality and fulfilled his vision with the creation of the Music Bowl. First announced in April 1956, it would be located



between two high mounds in Melbourne's King's Domain on the edge of the Royal Botanic Gardens, on land provided by the City of Melbourne; the massive canopy of the Bowl would be an architectural and engineering triumph for Melbourne.³ Roy Grounds' firm of Grounds, Romberg & Boyd was initially involved in designing the Bowl, originally in conjunction with Yuncken Freeman. It was to be a giant parabolic sound shell, but for a number of reasons, Grounds' firm withdrew and left Yuncken Freeman, principally through Barry Patten, as sole designers.⁴

They rejected the shell idea in favour of the now-famous draped web of high tensile steel cables bearing a skin of multiple sheets of plywood, with an extremely thin veneer of aluminium moulded to the external face (called Alumpy) and also used for projection screens at drive-ins) and supplied in pieces borne aloft by two 21-metre high ball-jointed masts made from fibre glass-covered steel. The main cable stretched from 21 metres under the ground, high across the top of the steel and fibreglass masts and down into the ground again.⁵ The result was described as a structure that leapt bat-like from its hole and achieved a startling sense of weightlessness.

¹ *The Age*, 27 August 1960.

² Robin Grow, *Brutalist Design in Melbourne: Spirit of Progress, Journal of Art Deco and Modernism Society of Australia*, No. 75, Spring 2018, p. 5; examples include Total House, 170 Russell Street; Hoidich Hall Swimming Centre, Melbourne; Plumbars and Goswami's Employees Union Building, Victoria Steel, Carlton; and Frochicov Psychiatric Centre, Gordon Street, Frochicov.

³ It was a time for experimentation with shapes and innovative engineering, such as the dome shape of the Academy of Sciences in Canberra, designed by Roy Grounds in 1956.

⁴ Robin Boyd was in Boston at the MIT.

⁵ *Architecture Today*, April 1959.



ENTRANCE TO NOW, ST KILDA
PHOTOGRAPH BY
REINHOLD KOLBE, 2009

The engineer for the remarkable design project was Bill Irwin, who had been responsible for the Olympic Swimming pool project—what a remarkable contribution he and his team made to modernist Melbourne.⁶ The Bowl was a huge success with the people of Melbourne and, not surprisingly, it received international recognition when it won the prestigious R. S. Reynolds Memorial award for 1959 from the American Institute of Architects (\$25,000 and a medal) and was selected as the 'Building of the year' by the editors of *Architecture and Arts* in 1960.⁷

Nearby, on St Kilda Road, another major commission was underway. A major bombshell had dropped on cultural and architectural circles in 1959 when Grounds, then 54, was selected to design the £3 million gallery and cultural centre on a site occupied by Wirth's Park, on St Kilda Road, just over the river Yarra and opposite Flinders Street railway station.⁸ The nine-man building committee selected him from about 45 applicants through a procedure that

⁶ Cross-Section No. 77, March 1959.

⁷ Cross-Section No. 88, February 1960.

⁸ For a full description of the history of the building, see Vicki Fairfax, *A Place Across the River*, 2002.

became controversial and a hot issue among Australian architects.⁹ But more controversy was to follow, as Grounds resigned from Gromboyd to take on the commission. The Gallery was probably the most important commission of his prolific oeuvre which, in one masterful stroke, provided Melbourne with a landmark, a civic symbol and an urban focus of distinctive identity. Reputedly inspired by Italian medieval architecture, the design resembled a fortress-like palazzo. According to Cross-Section, the exterior seemed rather grim at first, but the concept was later seen as quite romantic, described as "a Renaissance palace (with a fan-vaulted reception hall) set in a medieval moat with underwater sculpture, fountains and ripples to dapple the walls with reflected light and enchant the passer-by."¹⁰ It opened in 1968, with distinctive features that included a floating roof with upturned eaves, a water-wall at the semi-circular entrance, and the Great Hall with a stained glass ceiling by Leonard French. It was later enhanced by construction of the Arts Centre, comprising theatres and concert halls, constructed on the site of the Snowden Gardens, designed by Robin Boyd and which had featured a wind garden and fountain. Topped with a prominent spire, it was a massive, expensive and complex task, and would not be completed until 1982.

Construction of office buildings was a continuation of trends from the 1950s and the 1960s would be a decade that emphasised building bigger, higher and quicker. There was increased attention being paid to features for the comfort of the occupants, such as widespread air-conditioning. Curtain walls had certainly transformed the city and urban environment in the 1950s, while they were light (in comparison to masonry and brick), thin (providing extra usable—and lettable—floor space), cheaper (in terms of cost and speed of erection) and facilitated standardisation of internal fittings and equipment, they had been developed extraordinarily quickly and, in the view of many, without appropriate testing and assessment of their effects. The curtain wall had provided a new aesthetic for Melbourne buildings, but many architects, engineers and building owners expressed concerns about their finish. Extensive testing was often carried out to reassure the professionals and the general public, such as the 1960 design for



ENTRANCE TO NOW,
ST KILDA ROAD 1957
PORTLAND, SANDRINE
INTERNATIONAL & JOHN LARSEN
COLLECTION

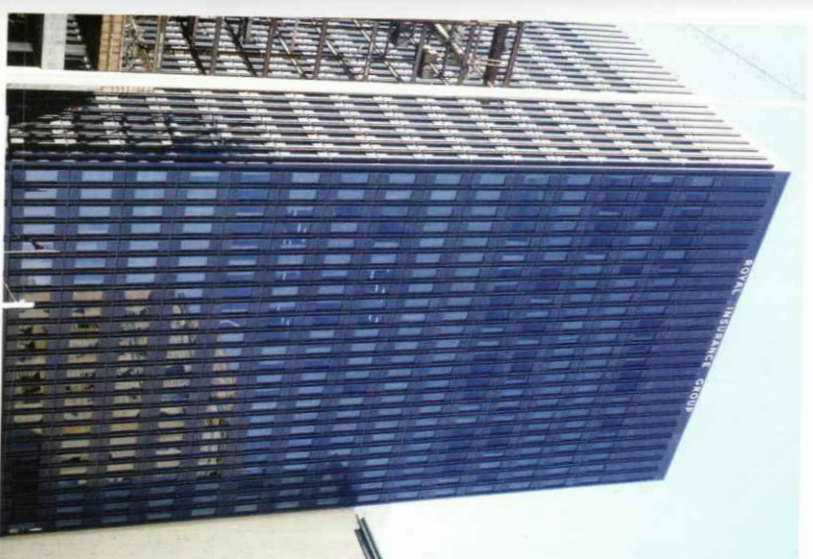
⁹ Cross-Section No. 83, September 1959.

¹⁰ Cross-Section No. 101, March 1961.

the new Shell Company headquarters at 155 William Street where a sample of curtain wall, 12 m (42 ft) high by 5 m (18 ft), was rigorously wind-tested at Essendon aerodrome.¹¹ The refreshingly simple building, on the corner of Bourke and William Streets, cost £1 million. The design was by Geelong architects Buchan Laird & Buchan, who were assisted by SOM from the USA, the first of a number of large buildings in which SOM were involved (remembering that SOM had a number of offices, each with its distinctive style) and the start of a trend of involving architectural firms from the USA. The 19-floor (including two basement levels) rigid frame structure was framed with aluminium curtain wall and solar grey glass, imported from the USA, and was totally sealed and incorporated a high-pressure air-conditioning system.¹²

In response to serious questioning as to the aesthetics and performance of glass curtain walls, some architects were beginning to prefer glazed pre-cast concrete panels on external walls. Practitioners such as Neville Gruzman praised the strength and beauty of glass, which under certain conditions can be a more desirable walling material than many others, but they also recognised its limitations.¹³ After all there was little (apart from colour and views from outside) that could be brought to flat glass finishes whereas finishes such as concrete cladding brought textural patterns and visual strength to building facades. However it was perhaps a gradual change, not one that happened immediately as the new decade clicked over, and curtain wall designs lingered into the 1960s, often favoured by insurance companies that were still dominating the development of large city buildings. A prime example was the New Zealand Insurance Company at 493 Bourke Street, a 1961 design by BSM. Constructed on a constrained city site, the size of the steel frame structure, with concrete slab floors, was a modest seven floors. There was room for another floor but this would have required another lift, and reduced overall lettable space. It was regarded as a gem of its kind—the street facade (adorned with a gold-enamelled kiwi, the symbol of the company) was regarded as the cool, formal apogee of glass curtain wall design, with black anodized mullions that passed over the opaque white glass spandrels.¹⁴ Another interesting use of glass was by H. Garnet Alsop on the Southern Cross Assurance Company in Market Street (now Reed House). Facing west, the street facade was protected with a suspended screen of heat-resistant glass, on a careful and clever arrangement of mullions.

By mid-decade, pre-cast concrete-clad office blocks were leading the field away from the lightweight curtain-wall facades of the previous decade. Perhaps the most accomplished was the Royal Insurance Company at 444 Collins St. (1965). The 18-storey Australian



headquarters for the company was on a site originally occupied in 1837 by the Lamb Inn, reputedly Melbourne's first licensed premises, and Yuncken Freeman's design was noticeable for its complete cladding in reconstructed black granite panels, pre-glazed before erection with dark-tinted thermal glass and relieved by vertical ribs.¹⁵ The ground and first floor were clad in larger versions of the panels, lending a lightness and transparency at ground level, with the mass of the main building hovering above. Observers predicted that the large, dark building could turn out to be grim-looking and the blackness of the building conjured up unfavourable analogies in non-architectural minds. As it approached completion it was recognised as architecture playing it so cool that it made every other city building in Melbourne look like an overdressed juke-box.¹⁶ It was acclaimed within the architectural profession, where its elegance and severe detailing of the facade and interiors attracted praise, and it won the Victorian Architecture Medal in 1967. More importantly it was a prelude to a number of

11 Cross-Section, No. 82, August 1959.

12 Cross-Section, No. 92, June 1960.

13 Neville Gruzman, 'Some Aesthetic and Practical Aspects of Sun Control', *Architecture in Australia*, July/September 1957.

14 Cross-Section, No. 139, May 1964, *Architecture Today*, December 1961.

15 *Architecture in Australia*, February, 1967, for a description of the various types of granite, see Building 10 in <http://oiesc2016.gso.org.au/assets/north-terrace-2nd-edition-high.pdf>

16 Cross-Section, No. 148, February 1965.



important black modernist commercial designs by the firm.¹⁷

The introduction of large city buildings in this decade occurred largely (but not exclusively) to the west of the major thoroughfare of Elizabeth Street. There were concerns about the doubtful bearing capacity of this area (Elizabeth Street was a former stream that discharged into the Yarra) and special pilings were often needed to ensure stability.

Further down the hill, at the corner of Collins and Elizabeth Streets, the Colonial Mutual Life Assurance Society Limited (CML) commissioned a new 21-storey building in 1963—the design by Stephenson & Turner was conservatively clad, in panels of cream travertine Italian marble, grey granite from Harcourt in Victoria and black Imperial granite from South Australia, commonly known as “Adelaide Black Granite”, “Imperial Black Granite” or “Austral Black Granite”.

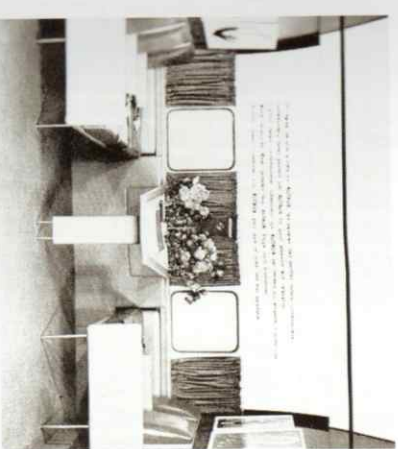
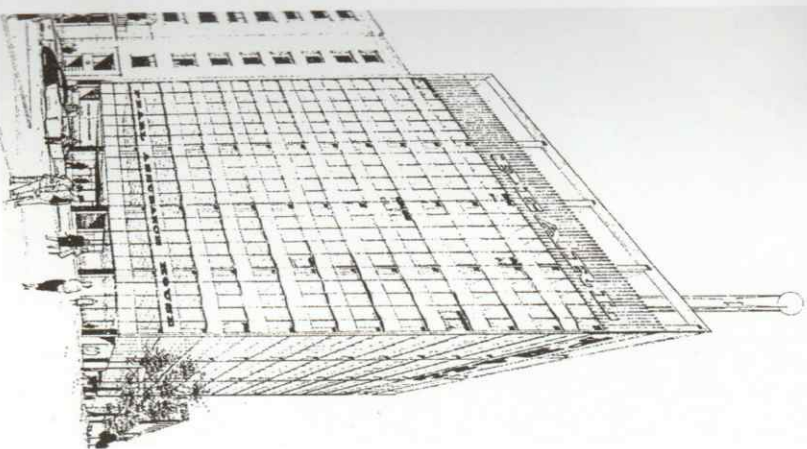
An important feature of the building was its setback from the street which provided a colonnade at ground level, as well as a small plaza on Collins Street where the footpath space was enlivened by a Tom Bass sculpture. Opinions were divided about the layout of the building and its placement on the corner. Some saw it as a mannered response to the historic city representing tension arising from competing notions of an existing city and a city devoted to the modern ideals of progress and flux.¹⁸ Others saw the setback as a dubious asset, describing the Elizabeth Street frontage as a windy, dusty, tram-rowdy corner. It certainly raised the question of whether a tall building rising sheer from the building line is objectionable or whether new buildings should have a generous amount of ground floor public space, as this one did.

Other new buildings in the western precinct included four on the intersection of Queen and Bourke Streets. What a remarkable corner of modernist design this was! On the south-west corner was Pearl Assurance House (1961), designed by Leslie M. Perrott & Partners. Featuring curtain wall facades, it comprised 11 office floors plus ground, basement and roof plantroom for machinery. The fully air-conditioned building had no opening windows and the curtain walling



Tom Bass sc.
CML, Collins
Photograph by
Robyn Gibson, 2014

¹⁷ http://vhq.dhheritagecouncil.vic.gov.au/places/c4740/download-report_Cross-Section_No.175_May.1967.
¹⁸ Philip Goad, Rowan Wilken and Julie Willis, *Australian Modern: The Architecture of Stephenson and Turner*, 2004, pp. 46–8.



TOP
Project Assurance
Architect Today, April 1960
AUCOE
Project Interior

PICTURED OPPOSITE
H C Sleight building,
Bourke Street
PHOTOGRAPH BY
ROBIN GRON, 2017

was finished with glazed tinted grey glass, together with reconstructed Dromana green spandrel facing panels, treated with silicone wax to prevent moisture absorption and weathering aspects of the grimy city. Tapered to avoid uneven reflection of sunlight, they provided a pleasing design feature. It also included a ground floor office for Alitalia Airlines that included a full-scale replica of the striking modernist interior of a DC8 cocktail lounge, intended to provide prospective passengers with a genuine "aircraft atmosphere".¹⁹ The other three buildings were designed by BSM, providing a remarkable footprint on the intersection. On the north-west corner was the South British Insurance Company Ltd (1962). It demonstrated the trend from slick glass curtain wall cladding to more heavily modelled facades and succeeded by tasteful choice of colour and texture. The ground floor was devoted to a luxurious lift lobby and some very good planting and landscaping. It also provided lessons to others about how the developers and owners met and solved a range of almost insurmountable problems in relation to service lane access, Council laneways, sewers controlled by the M. M.B.W., and city height limits.²⁰ The south-east corner was occupied by the Prudential Assurance Company Ltd—a steel-framed building, with floors of precast concrete tubs that spanned between the steel beams, and an exterior of reconstructed N. S. W. granite, which contrasted with recessed spandrels of Italian glass mosaic under the windows.²¹ The third (on the north-east corner) was constructed for oil company H. C. Sleight Ltd (1962)—a 17-storey building, described as "a solid look while still modernist" which demonstrated materials such as "decorative" precast concrete panels, horizontally expressed masonry and glazed façade, with some use of "luxury" finishes, such as gold tiles (later removed).²² *The Age* reported that "a novel feature of the building will be the absence of centre supporting pillars on each floor. The ceilings and roof will be supported by the walls,"²³ while *Cross-Section* regarded

19 *Architecture in Australia*, September 1961; *Architecture Today*, April 1960; *Architecture Today*, June 1962.

20 *Cross-Section*, No. 114, April 1962; *Architecture in Australia*, March 1962.

21 *Architecture in Australia*, September 1960.

22 National Trust of Australia (Victoria), Melbourne's Marvellous Modernism, A Comparative Analysis of Post-War, Modern Architecture in Melbourne's CBD 1955–1975, September 2014.

23 *The Age*, 19 April 1962.



CHAPTER 06 1960s MAJOR BUILDINGS



RACV building, 123
Queen Street
PHOTOGRAPH BY
WOLFGANG SIEVERS, 1961,
PICTURES COLLECTION,
STATE LIBRARY VICTORIA

it as a highly polished, deft and professional design, so facile and fastidious that it almost begins to irritate, particularly the gold mosaic facing to all but the corner columns that proves again that nothing incriminates a building more than gilt.²⁴

Heading south on Queen Street from this corner, BSM designed the 15-storey Royal Automobile Club of Victoria (RACV) building in 1961, one of six buildings by the firm in Queen Street. The extremely complex building served as a club headquarters, with facilities that included a billiards room, squash courts, restaurant, bars and lounges, as well as 80 bedrooms for club members, each with its own bath and shower. It also provided eight floors of offices, and was a building for people at leisure and at work. It was further illustration of the move away from curtain wall design, with the façade of the tower employing windows punched into a brown brick wall, and was praised for its exquisitely sophisticated detailing, both internal and external. One striking feature was a water sculpture by Tom Bass.²⁵

Soon after, Yuncken Freeman designed the Scottish Amicable Building at 140 Queen Street. Although not black like the Royal Insurance, it was equally sober, with protection from the western sun provided by a repeated pattern of pre-cast box-framed windows that projected

²⁴ Cross-Section No. 139, May 1964; Cross-Section No. 116, June 1962.

²⁵ *Architecture Today*, May 1961; *Architecture in Australia*, September 1961.

out from the grey glass. Other notable buildings emerged, such as for A.C.I. at 550 Bourke Street by Buchan Laird & Buchan (since demolished), the Houston Building, Queen Street (E. & G. Kolle & Associates), the 60 Market St building by BSM,²⁶ and Guardian Assurance Company at 454-458 Collins Street (BSM, 1961), one of Melbourne's few post-war buildings to be faced in natural stone (Stawell freestone). The modernist buildings at the eastern end of Collins Street were joined by the Conzinc Rio Australia (CRA) building, constructed between 1959-62. It replaced Melbourne Mansions (1906), regarded as the first block of residential flats in the city. The CRA building, designed by Bernard Evans & Partners, was 26 storeys, curtain walled, with a setback to the street, and was Melbourne's tallest building until the end of the 60s. It dominated the eastern skyline of the city. However, it showed that not even such massive buildings were safe from subsequent developments: it lasted only 25 years before being demolished in 1988 by Whelan the Wrecker, Melbourne's most prolific demolition company. When envisaging how to demolish the building, Jim Whelan thought it would be straightforward—"I'd just put a crane up the side and take it down layer by layer, like dismantling a wedding cake" and that was pretty much how it went.²⁷ In 1991 it was replaced by the 50-storey 101 Collins Street development.

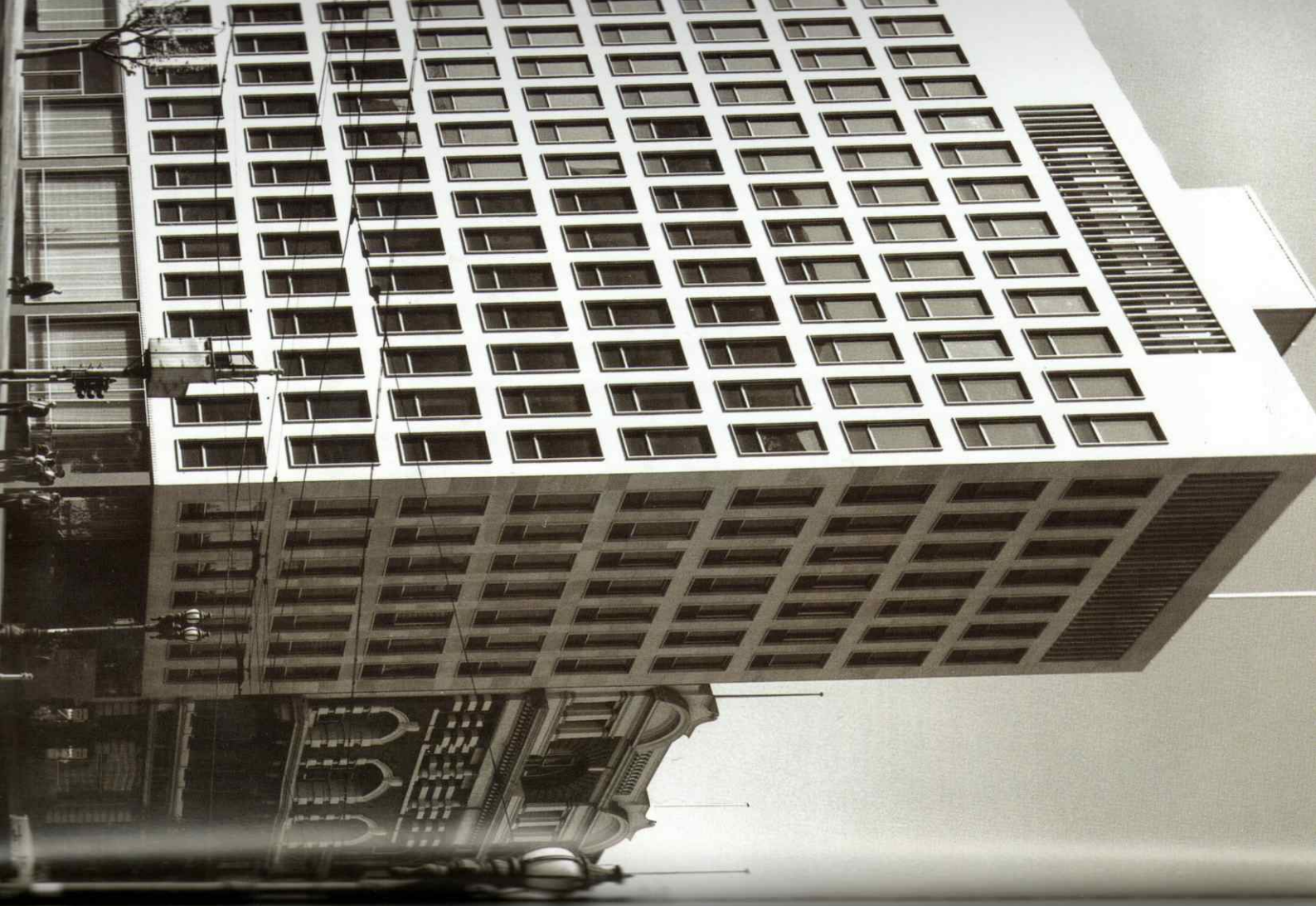
An important building at the eastern end of Collins Street was the headquarters of the newly-created Reserve Bank, on the site of the former Occidental Hotel. Designed by the Commonwealth Department of Works, it was completed in stages, commencing with the basement level, ground floor and first floor in December 1963, and the remaining 15 floors in



Scottish Amicable Co.,
140 Queen Street
PHOTOGRAPHY
WOLFGANG SEIFERT, 1945,
PICTURES COLLECTION
STATE LIBRARY VICTORIA

²⁶ For images of construction of 60 Market Street, Melbourne, see Mary Turner Snow, 'Builders of Melbourne', 1972, pp. 105-8; *Architecture in Australia*, April-June 1958.

²⁷ Robyn Aneer, *A City Lost and Found*, 2014, p. 273.



1966. The external walls were clad in a combination of white marble (columns and mullions) and black granite spandrels, sourced locally. High on the Exhibition Street side of the building, a sculptural panel by Gordon Andrews depicted the abstract and slightly asymmetrical symbol of the new bank. More visible and able to be celebrated by visitors was a large mural created on the ground floor by Sid Nolan that depicted the Eureka Stockade, representing conflict between gold miners and colonial authority in 1850s Ballarat. Nolan was a good friend of the Governor of the Reserve Bank, H. C. 'Nugget' Coombs, who suggested that the mural should be on a theme related to an Australian legend. Using the medium of enamel on copper and consisting of 66 panels, 20-metres long and 3.6-metres high, the mural depicted scenes of frantic skirmishes. Some commentators noted the irony of a mural showing an insurrection being displayed in a conservative, respectable bank.²⁸

One of the most elegant high-rise buildings of the 1960s arose right in the heart of the city and illustrated the cycles of development. Royal Mail House, corner of Bourke and Swanson Streets, boasted a long history, commencing life as a three-storey pub in 1848 and providing a departure point for stagecoaches. In 1934, it received a make-over in Art Deco style under the hand of Robert McIntyre, father of the modernist architect Peter McIntyre. It was one of a number of city hotels upgraded in anticipation of the Centenary of Melbourne celebrations, and a major consideration was the provision of meals along the lines of "the modern cafeteria, a prominent feature of American hotels".²⁹ After a long, colourful and interesting history, it was demolished in the early 1960s to make way for Royal Mail House.

Designed by D. Graeme Lumsden, the black steel structure was adorned with gold mosaic tiled spandrels, an opaque façade of chequer board patterned windows, projecting pre-cast sunshades and a long corrugated concrete footpath canopy that brought a touch of Brazilian



TOP

Reserve Bank,
Collins Street
PHOTOGRAPH BY
ROBIN GROOM, 2019

ABOVE

Royal Mail House,
Bourke Street
PHOTOGRAPH BY
ROBIN GROOM, 2019

PICTURED OPPOSITE

Guindon Assurance,
Collins Street

PHOTOGRAPH BY
WOLFGANG SILVERBERG, THE
PICTURES COLLECTION
STATE LIBRARY VICTORIA

²⁸ <https://museum.rba.gov.au/exhibitions/sidney-nolan/>; the mural has now been relocated to Australian National University in Canberra, and the bank symbol removed.

²⁹ *The Age*, 20 February 1934.



Southern Cross Hotel,
Exhibition Street
POSTCARD/PURETT PUBLISHERS,
© JOHN SANDS (ALIST LTD,
COLLECTION OF ROBIN GROW

curves to Melbourne. It remains in generally original condition except for removal of vertical elements that connected the projecting sunshades to each other and a bright orange paint job on the western wall and the rooftop fins.

Melbourne still had two former market sites awaiting development at the start of the 1960s. The former Western Market in Collins Street provided one of Melbourne's few island sites (a block location bounded by four streets—Collins, Market, William and Flinders Lane). A decision to construct a large building on the site for National Mutual Insurance Company was made in August 1959 and in 1961 a model of the planned centre was put on display. Completed by 1965, it comprised a 20-storey building, with four lower level floors occupying the entire site for parking of over 500 cars. In the absence of a resolved City Square, Melbourne desperately needed open public space. With the main office tower set back 30 metres from the Collins Street front, Melbourne gained a new plaza—70 metres x 45 metres on the north side, landscaped and open to three sides with shopping space provided at the plaza and lower concourse levels. The main

tower was totally air-conditioned and fully-glazed and surrounded by sun-shading on balconies at each floor that provided protection from the sun as well as access for window cleaning. Significantly the design (by Godfrey Spowers, Hughes, Mewton & Lobb, and Leith & Bartlett, joint architects) served as a demonstration of other alternatives to the architecture of multi-storey office blocks than the ubiquitous all-glass curtain wall sheath.³⁰ It also included a three-level podium facing onto Flinders Lane³¹ and was finished in marble which contributed to its demise in 2012 when a slab fell off the side of the building and onto the forecourt below. It was sold soon after and demolished.

At the former Eastern Market site, on the corner of Bourke and Exhibition Streets, another major modernist structure emerged. Owned by the Melbourne Council, there were contrary views about the market—some smiled favourably on its spaces occupied by florists, green grocers, clothes stalls, and sellers of books, antiques and bric-a-brac. Others regarded it as “a dreary morgue—a vast, rambling monstrosity, half waste and given over to the decayed stalls



PICTURED OPPOSITE
National Mutual Centre,
Collins Street
PHOTOGRAPH BY
WOLFGANG SIEFFER, 1966,
PICTURES COLLECTION,
STATE LIBRARY VICTORIA

³⁰ Cross-Section, No. 104, June 1961.
³¹ Robyn Annet, *A City Lost & Found*, 2014, p. 167.



John Batman Motor-Inn,
Queen's Road
Postcard, John Engländer &
Co, from private collection.

around the world for chains such as Hilton and Statler, this was Melbourne's first foray of a hotel in the world of mid-century modernism.

Owned by Pan Am Airways, it was designed by a prominent architectural firm from the USA, Welton Becket & Associates in partnership with the local firm, Leslie M. Perrott & Partners. It was finished in cool 'Waikiki' blue and featured mid-60s signature features such as an angular rippling frame, folded plate roofs and arched arcades, together with brightly coloured panels and a courtyard enlivened by a fountain-sculpture by Ann Graham.³² But the design of the public rooms lacked consistency and style and each was an unapologetic gimmick—a Club Grill (with red leather bucket chairs and red felt walls), The Tavern (a replica of an old "English" inn), a Pub (Saloon Bar), a dining room called the Mayfair Room, a cocktail bar called Wilawa (claimed to be an Aboriginal word for Stop Here) and a Coolbah restaurant, all of which reinforced the view of many that the architecture celebrated the values of a kitsch culture at its peak. For all that it was the venue of choice for big events, such as TV Week Logie Awards, the Brownlow Medal count for the Victorian Football League, and many more. The Australis ballroom could accommodate 1600 people theatre style, or 1000 for a banquet and it boasted the largest convention facilities in Australia at the time. It also included a number of coffee shops and a ten-pin bowling alley. After it was disclosed that the building suffered from 'concrete cancer', the site was sold to developers in 1997. The building was demolished in 2003 and replaced by an office tower.³⁴

Robin Boyd was one who lashed out at the Australian desire for a 'Statler-Hilton' type of culture and deplored copying recent skyscrapers and luxury hotels from the USA. He probably

of forgotten corn-cucurs and poulterers. Best thing would be to raze it."³² And so they did! It was replaced by the Southern Cross hotel, regarded by some as bright and brash. It opened in 1962 and contained 600 bedrooms that were furnished with restraint, in inoffensive contemporary good taste and with picture windows designed to be opened. It provided facilities demanded by a new generation, especially international tourists who prized daiquiris and kidney-shaped swimming pools; perhaps its most famous guests were the Beatles during their 1964 Australian tour. In a decade of similar-styled hotels

³² The Herald, 25 August 1945.

³³ She had just returned from a study tour in Italy, studying diverse methods of art techniques applicable to architecture, *Architecture Today*, October 1961.

³⁴ <http://australianfoodtimeline.com.au/southern-cross-hotel/>, *Architecture Today*, September 1962.



Park Royal Motel,
Parkville
PHOTOGRAPH BY
ROBIN GROOM, 2019

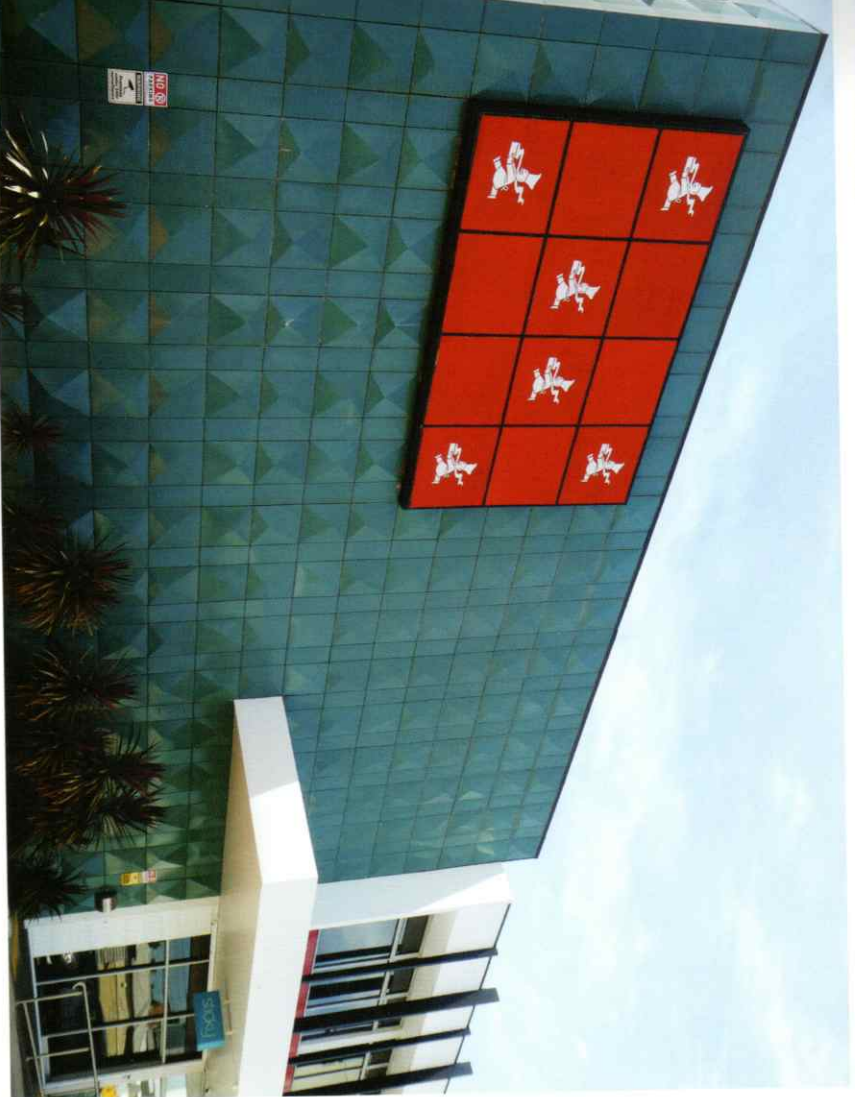
Park Royal Motel,
Parkville
POSTCARD, PUBLISHER UNKNOWN,
FROM PRIVATE COLLECTION

didn't think much of Becket who was responsible for many similar hotels around the world – Boyd asked whether we could cast aside this idolatry and use Australian ideas.³⁵ These views probably influenced his design for the 1962 John Batman Motor Inn opposite Albert Park lake in Melbourne's inner south. It stood out when built, less so these days, with its sweeping curved skeleton roof frame that provided a memorable visual image above the six-storey building and served the practical purpose of covering the lift overrun and other roof-mounted equipment. At the centre of the roof space a two-level "honeymoon" suite was placed. Finished in grey concrete block, with a signature of vertically massed ribbon windows, it met Boyd's desire to create a building that some viewed as "highly urbanised" yet, at the same time, highly sophisticated.³⁶

Boyd had re-worked a design that originated from Bernard Evans & Partners, who had obtained all the necessary permits. Neil Clerehan astutely observed that the two firms of architects were engaged for their specific capabilities: Evans (a long-term (1949–73), Melbourne city councillor for Gipps ward) was known to be able to secure

³⁵ See Robin Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness*, 1960, passim.
³⁶ <https://www.domain.com.au/news/evolution-of-a-modernist-20150118-2cwt8/>





and Seeley,
Brisbane
1960s, 2019

building permits, here for a relatively large commercial building in a then residential area, and Boyd for the final design. It also provides a wonderful example of adaptive re-use of signature buildings, and in its life has been an hotel crossed with a motel, a bank training facility, a college for ambulance officers and, since 2000, a rooming house with accommodation for 67 people who need affordable or supported housing options.³⁷ Sometimes a single building can lead the way in transforming a precinct—and this building was instrumental in the development of Queens Road into a commercial zone and one that became a significant motel strip.

On the northern side of the city, in Royal Parade, Parkville, another significant motel emerged in 1962—the Park Royal (now the Vibe Hotel). Said to be the first multi-storey motel in Victoria, it was a striking (and notably intact) example, distinguished by the distinctive parabolic arched porte cochère, the symbol of the Park Royal chain. The designer was Theodore (Ted) Bertram, a prolific generator of designs for motels, bowling alleys and a series of large houses, particularly in the wealthy suburb of Toorak.

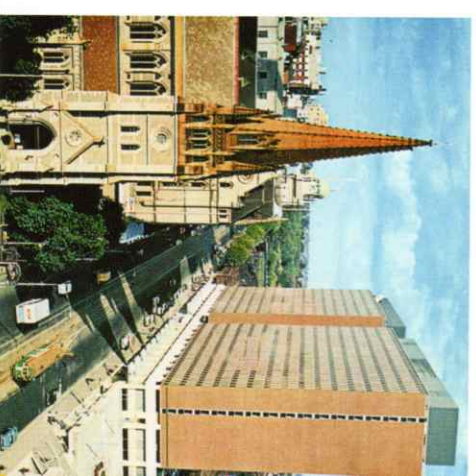
³⁷ <http://vhd.heritagecouncil.vic.gov.au/places/66651/download-report>

He also produced designs for commercial organisations, such as the Craig & Seeley offices and showroom (1962) in Brunswick, the new headquarters for the manufacturer of Chef brand cookers. In an industry not noted for colour and style, the striking building projected a modern image for the company and featured the company's own factory-made porcelain enamel panels on the street facades. Green panels resembling shallow pyramidal forms stud the wall surface, punctuated with a large red enamel panels that include the company's logo, a white Chef running with a steaming dish.³⁸

All of these new buildings attracted a degree of negative comment, some more than others. But the buildings that continually raised eyebrows and were regularly disparaged were the two towers on the south side of Flinders Street that occupied the site of today's Federation Square. Named the Princes Gate Towers, they were more commonly known as the Gas and Fuel Buildings after their major tenant. The 15-storey rectangular twin brick towers, including a plaza and 14 shops, were intended to be the first step in covering the rail yards behind them. Completed in 1967, to a design by Leslie M. Perrott & Partners (with David Simpson as the Principal Architect), they included a re-working of the Princes Bridge railway station and a large expanse of concrete decking over the entrance to the new station. The two towers were recognised as an important new project for Melbourne and were not necessarily disliked for their design, but for their placement, as they acted as a barrier that cut off the city from the river Yarra. They became a symbol of the shortcomings of planning in the 1960s and were demolished in 1996/7

to make way for Federation Square. It was probably unavoidable that the Square would cause headaches and attract much negative comment and controversy, which continues today. Ironically, it too has been criticized for blocking the city from the river.

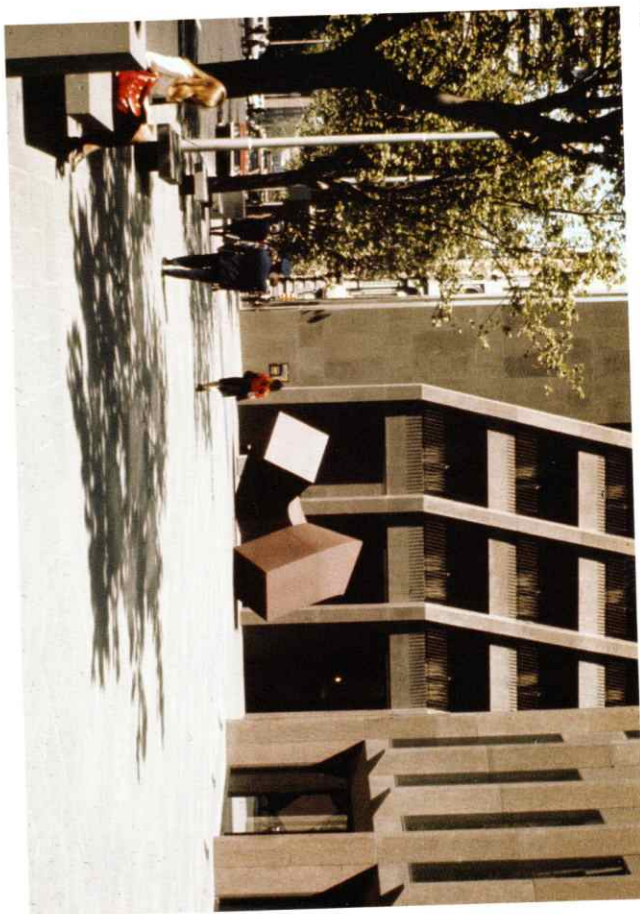
The end of this remarkable decade saw the emergence of two major buildings that faced off across William Street. In 1969, the 26-storey AMP Tower and its adjacent six-storey St. James building,³⁹ were ready to be occupied by the owner and other tenants. Designed by BSM, in association with the San



³⁸ <http://vhd.heritagecouncil.vic.gov.au/places/12609>

³⁹ It carried on the name of the building that previously occupied the site between Bourke Street and Little Collins Street.

AMP William Street
PHOTOGRAPH BY PETER WILLE,
PETER WILLE SLIDE
COLLECTION, 1965-71,
STATE LIBRARY VICTORIA



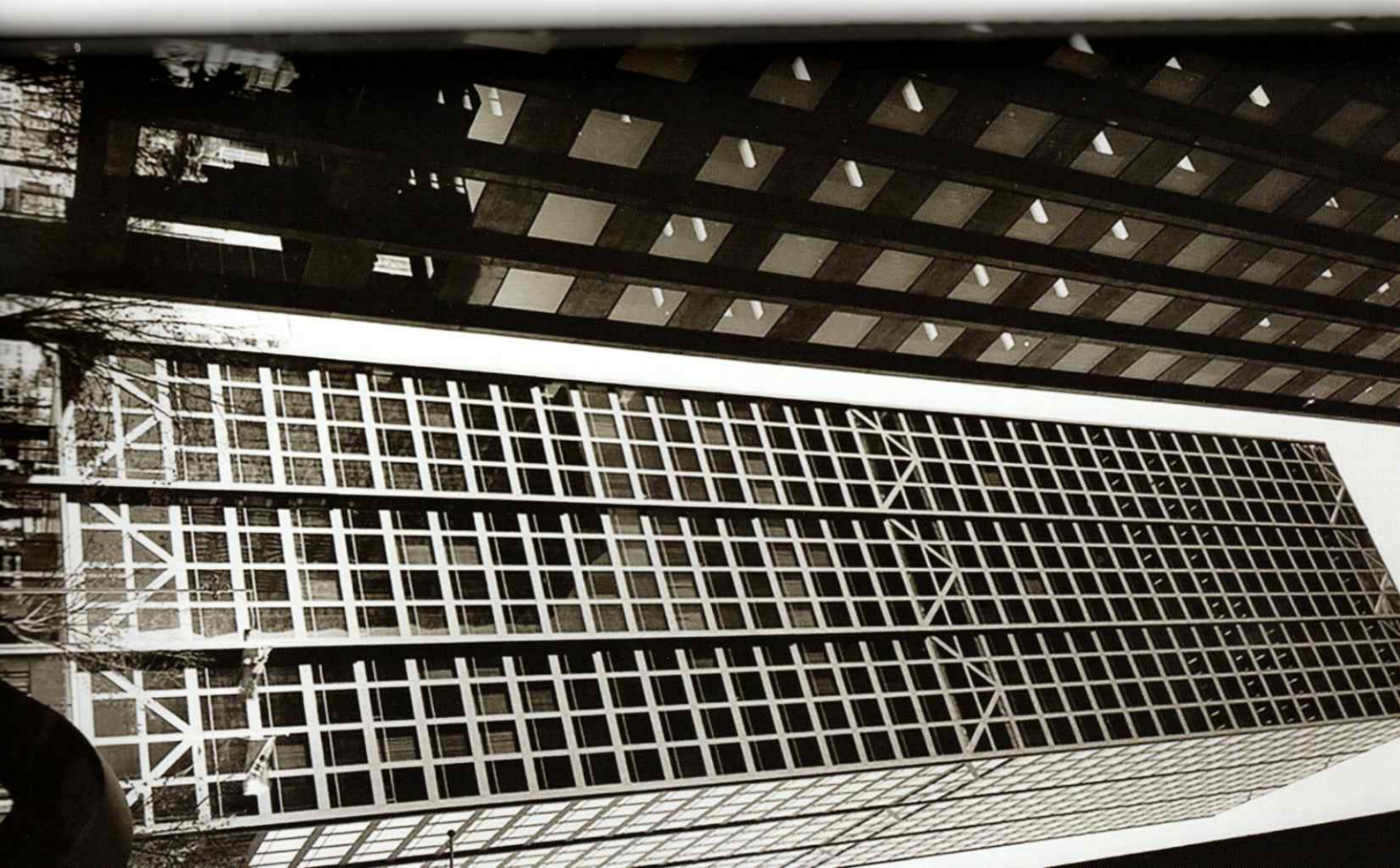
Francisco office of SOM, the pair can be regarded as one of the finest examples of Brutalist design in commercial Melbourne. On a large site (nearly a hectare), the complex represented the mid-1960s shift towards monumental tower and urban plaza design. The vertical lines of the tower contrasted dramatically with the splayed and angled colonnade of St. James, which sloped away from the tower block to permit maximum sunlight to the plaza and lower floors. According to *Cross-Section*, the infamous angular facade of the St. James building displayed "gravity, unity, and seriousness" which showed up much of the surrounding architecture of the city centre.⁴⁰ Both building façades were faced with reconstructed granite slabs up to 9 metres high and 1.2 metres wide. Other exterior materials included anodised aluminium and bluestone paving while marble stainless steel and vinyl wall coverings were featured internally.

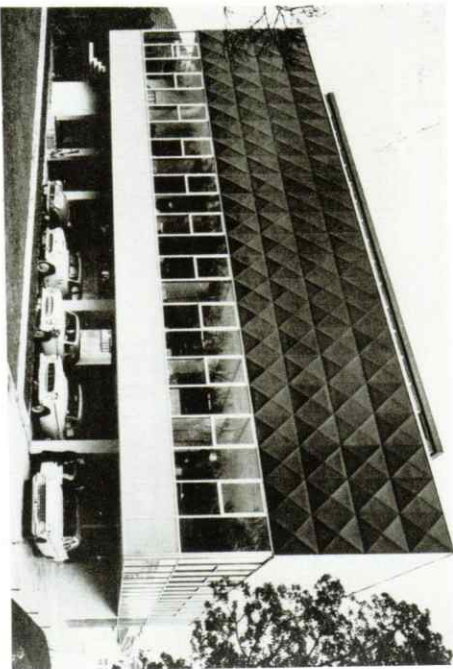
The forecourt of the buildings was enhanced by serried plane trees and a sculpture called *Awakenings* (by Clement Meadmore), relocated during upgrading of the AMP buildings in 2010. Like a number of other sculptural works of this period that were moved or dismantled, it remains in storage.⁴¹

On the opposing corner, at 140 William Street, the BHP (Broken Hill Proprietary) building was constructed between 1967-72. It continued the trend of replacing large 19th century hotels, in this case the Menzies, with modern office buildings. Designed by Yuncken Freeman, in collaboration with the American firm of SOM, it was one of eight major office towers designed

⁴⁰ *Cross-Section*, No. 205, December 1969.

⁴¹ It continued the design of Meadmore's sculptures, which were variations on the single theme of a square cross section which is translated along a more or less complex curve. *Architecture in Australia*, June 1972.





The Victorian Automobile Chamber of Commerce Building
Architects: BERNARD EVANS & ASSOCIATES

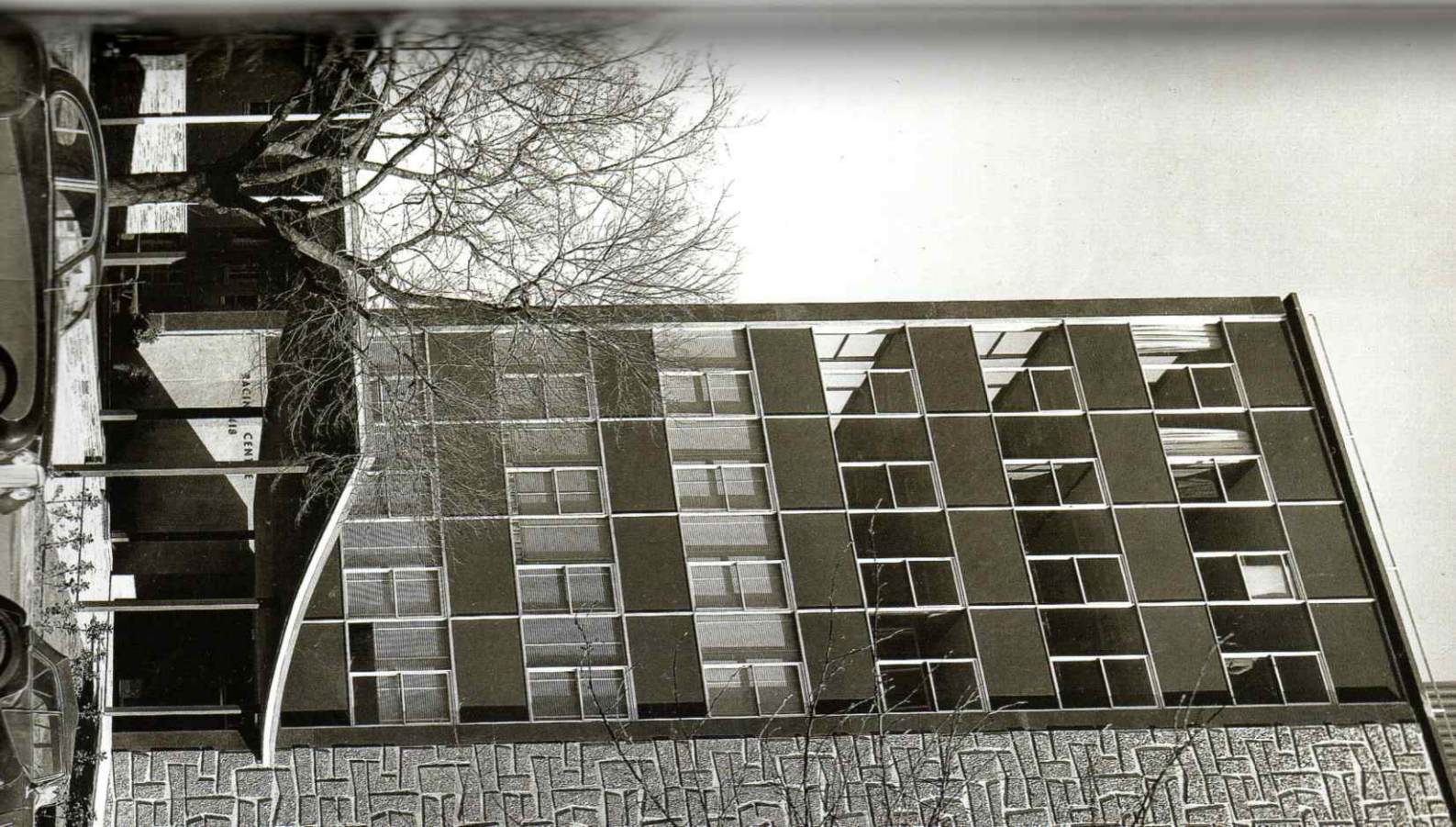
VACC, St Kilda Road
ARCHITECTURE TODAY,
MARCH 1959

is getting no greater quickly. One side, in Melbourne City, stagnates under a council ban on non-residential buildings. The other side, under South Melbourne, is being unsympathetically exploited".⁴⁷ The previous year, the Melbourne & Metropolitan Board of Works (MMBW) proudly unveiled its first metropolitan planning scheme, which designated St Kilda Road as Route 27, "the main outlet to the bayside suburbs and the beaches beyond".⁴⁸ In 1956, when legislation empowered the MMBW to oversee planning matters that straddled council boundaries, the entirety of St Kilda Road was rezoned to permit commercial development with the proviso that any new buildings be set back at least 13.7 metres (45 feet). The gloves were now off.

St Kilda Road's first multi-storey office building, for which plans had already been prepared by Bernard Evans in early 1957, was the new headquarters of the Victorian Automotive Chamber of Commerce (VACC) at No 464.⁴⁹ To unfold in several stages, the complex would comprise a low-rise podium (with undercroft carparking and roof garden) as a base for five further storeys. Completed in 1958, the first stage presented a striking street facade clad in dark green diamond-pointed enamelled steel panels. Few casual observers were cognisant that this "apparently new building" (as reported by *Cross-Section*) was merely a new front to the existing house on the site; the remainder of Evans' grand scheme would not come to fruition for some years.⁵⁰ Still, it was an auspicious start to what would soon become Melbourne's pre-eminent precinct for progressive commercial architecture. That same year also saw the completion of new premises for Custom

Mayfair at No 618 (1958) and Kuniko at No 633 (1960-61). By then, even Bernard Evans himself could deftly embrace minimalist apartment design, as he did with a slick scheme for an unnamed ten-storey block at No 622 (1960-61).

Historically, development along St Kilda Road unfurled in a somewhat ad hoc manner, not least of all because the thoroughfare itself delineated a municipal boundary: each side of the street fell under a different planning regime. As ruefully observed by *Cross-Section* in late 1955, "the district of St Kilda Road, Melbourne, once Australia's greatest street,

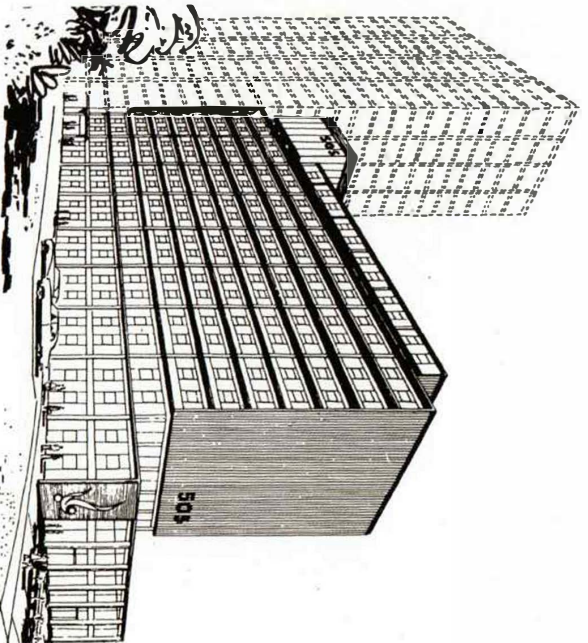


⁴⁷ *Cross-Section*, No 38, December 1955.

⁴⁸ MMBW, Melbourne Metropolitan Planning Scheme 1954, Report, p 100.

⁴⁹ "Multi-storey block for St Kilda Road", *The Age*, 21 March 1957.

⁵⁰ *Cross-Section*, No 71, September 1958.



The project by Park Lake Pty. Ltd., to be known as "505" St. Kilda Road, will be completed by the end of this year (illustration shows future 25 storey extension).

Architects are Bernard Evans and Associates.

Credit at No 568 (Plaisted & Warner), a block of medical consulting rooms at No 421 (Harry A & Frank L Norris) and the Victorian Racing Club (VRC) headquarters at No 418 (Leith & Bartlett). Although these three buildings varied in scale (respectively two, four and six storeys), they were unified by a consistent stylistic expression of curtain-walled street frontages with largely blank masonry side walls. The standout, not only in scale but also in expression, was the VRC building, with side walls enlivened by patterned pre-cast concrete panels in a nod to the increasingly popular populist style that Robin Boyd would soon denounce as Featurism.

Smaller in scale but perhaps more significant in a purely architectural historical sense was the two-storey building designed by BSM as the firm's own drawing office. Located at No 366, this slick elevated curtain-walled box fittingly occupied the site of the house that Walter Burley Griffin had renovated as his own drawing office more than three decades earlier. Griffin indeed set a precedent for a rising number of architects drawn to establish professional addresses in St Kilda Road in the post-war era. BSM may have been the only firm to design their own premises in the late 1950s, but others to maintain office space there included Montgomery, King & Trengove, Anatol Kagan, Brian O'Connor, Rosenfeldt & Gherardin, Stewart Handasyde, Kurt Popper, Victor Dumbrell, Arnold Bridge, Pethebridge & Bell and (to nobody's surprise) Bernard Evans.

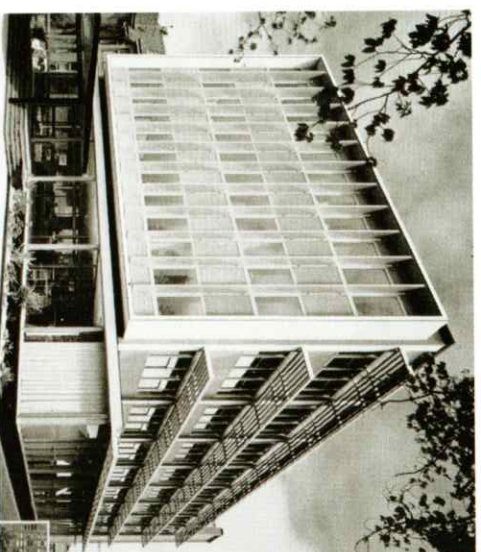
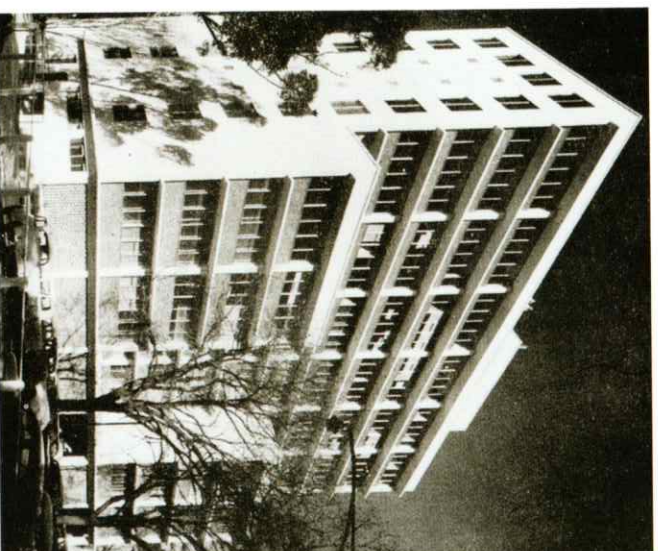
Fittingly, it was Evans who designed St Kilda Road's first true skyscraper: a speculative project for the Stanhill Group at No 505 that commenced construction in late 1958. With a two-storey podium crowned by a setback block of nine further levels, the design referenced Evans' recent but still only partly realised scheme for the VACC. Stripped back to a minimum, its curtain-walled exterior reportedly incorporated more than 1,000 sandwich panels, with horizontal sun shades along the north side and a continuous screen of vertical louvres to the street frontage.⁵¹

505 St Kilda Road
ARCHITECTURE: TODAY, JUNE 1959

⁵¹ Architecture & Arts, April 1960.

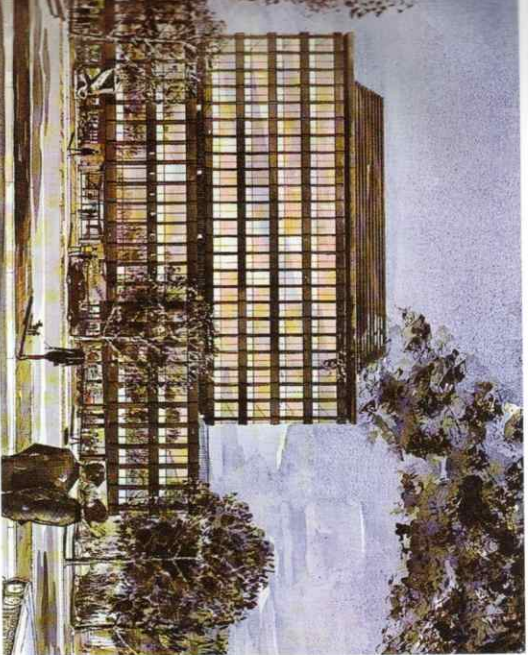
At ground level, a landscaped forecourt led the eye towards the building's one concession to ornament: a massive mural by émigré sculptor Karl Duldig. On completion in 1960, the building was deemed a towering achievement of high-rise commercial architecture on a broader metropolitan scale, with ample coverage in *Architecture & Arts*, *Foundations* and, oddly enough, the *Australian Home Beautiful*.

The early 1960s saw a spate of similarly grand-scaled office buildings spring up along St Kilda Road. The Gas & Fuel Corporation, which had occupied existing premises at No 469 for some time, replaced them with new 11-storey premises on the same site (Mackay & Potter, 1958-60), while utility rivals, Colonial Gas Holdings, built its seven-storey office block at No 480 (architect unknown, 1962-63). Not to be outdone, leading building material manufacturers James Hardie & Company followed suit with nine-storey headquarters at No 594 (Oakley & Parkes & Partners, 1961-62), conceived in a loosely Wrightian mode with a recessed stairwell tower that contrasted with the rows of horizontal window bays and balcony-like spandrels. Such was the rapidly increasing scale of development that some of St Kilda Road's original corporate tenants, having built relatively modest premises in the late 1950s, were now moved to enlarge or replace them. The original two-storey Custom Credit building at No 568, completed in 1958, was superseded barely four years later by a four-storey counterpart (Mathieson House) alongside at No 570, with an elegant façade of precast panels in polished reconstituted stone (R. S. Demaine, Russell, Trundle, Armstrong & Orton, 1961-62). This period also saw the realisation of Bernard Evans' 1957 scheme for the VACC building at No 464. Completed in 1964, the new building with its unusually expansive horizontal expression and slick façade of bronze-tinted glazing, all but engulfed the original 1958 premises on the site. Even these, however, were soon dwarfed by what became St Kilda Road's most publicised and prominent office block:



TOP
Gas & Fuel Corporation,
St Kilda Road
AUSTRALIAN ARCHITECTURE
TODAY, AUGUST 1960

ABOVE
Mathieson House
ARCHITECTURE TODAY,
FEBRUARY 1962



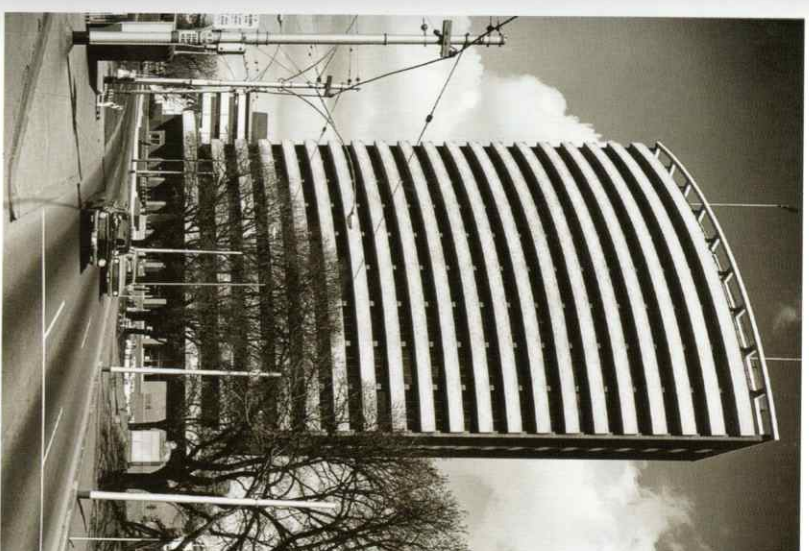
BP CO., ST KILDA ROAD, 1964
ARTIST: SIMON REEVES

the headquarters of British Petroleum (BP) at the Albert Road junction (R. S. Demaine, Russell, Trundle, Armstrong & Orton, 1962-64). Built on the site of Princes Terrace, a row of terrace houses that straddled the curved corner, the new building extruded this convex profile for 24 storeys with a distinctive banded façade of dark-coloured brickwork and rendered spandrels with understated surface pattern comprising a linear motif. Like several other 1960s towers, further visual interest was provided by

integrated artwork: a relief mural of fibreglass electroplated with copper (Stanislaus Ostojakowski, Adelaide) and an abstract sculpture in the theatre foyer (Norma Redpath, 1964). The building became indelibly ingrained into the memory of many Melburnians when BP adorned it with a huge illuminated star each Christmas and Easter. BP relocated in 1993 and the building was purchased and converted into over 100 apartments (one of the first such conversions in Melbourne) and modified externally with the addition of balcony terraces for the new occupants. On completion in 1995 it was re-named as The Domain and became one of the prestige high-rise apartment towers in Melbourne, a status it still enjoys.

In a sense, the much-heralded completion of BP House marked the end of the first wave of commercial development on St Kilda Road. Certainly, it slowed to a gentler pace in the second half of the decade, with the buildings themselves of mostly simpler form and more modest scale. Examples such as the five-storey headquarters of the Victorian Chamber of Manufacturers at No 368 (BSM, 1964-65), a speculative six-storey office building at No 424 (Stephenson & Turner, 1965), the six-storey premises of Control Data Australia at No 474 (Kurt Popper, 1965-66) and the five-storey Dairy Industries House at No 576 (Theodore Berman, 1968) were typical, with simple grid-like façades of exposed structural frames infilled with brick or pre-cast spandrels. A slightly later nine-storey speculative block at No 582 (George Campbell & Associates, 1969) showed a return to more decorative finishes in its use of rock-faced clay brick, marble mosaic tiles and exposed quartz aggregate.⁵²

In July 1970, St Kilda Road was roundly dismissed by Robin Boyd (whose only major project therein was the Southgate Fountain in the Snowden Gardens, later removed for the Victorian Arts Centre) as a "gaudy strip of pretty new comic carnival buildings



contrasts so badly with the broad vision of the nineteenth century planners who created the great road they are destroying. These buildings, on the average, are worse than one finds in any other developed Western country of the kind with which we like to associate ourselves. They are derived, of course, from American patterns...but here they are copied without the élan, sumptuousness and luxuriant planting that makes the American models seem so desirable. They are an index to the sophistication of the average Australian board of directors and the level of the signs of the average Australian architect living on our isolated island. That is why I use the word tragic."⁵³ Boyd, who died the following year, never had a chance to comment on the even more radical transformation of St Kilda Road during the 1970s, 80s and 90s, when the wholesale destruction of so many "comic carnival buildings" of the 1950s and 60s constituted a tragedy of its own.

⁵² 'New St Kilda Road building', *The Age*, 28 May 1969.

⁵³ Robin Boyd, 'Largal vandellium', *The Age*, 9 July 1970.