THE MODERN MOVEMENT IN NEW SOUTH WALES
A THEMATIC STUDY AND SURVEY OF PLACES

Commissioned by
Heritage Council of New South Wales

Prepared by
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INTRODUCTION

This essay has been written to provide a clearly written historical account of Modern Movement architecture and landscape design in New South Wales, as a part of the NSW Heritage Council’s State Heritage Register Thematic Listings Program. It is not intended to be a comprehensive and detailed history but provide an understanding of how and why the Modern Movement caught on in NSW, its richness and diversity, the imagination and innovation of its designers and the beauty of what was created.

The years between 1910 and 1970 are generally accepted as the period when the Modern Movement arrived and then matured in Australia. However, the first really convincing buildings in NSW showing an understanding of European and American Modern Movement architecture and design were constructed during the 1930s, as the state was emerging from the worst effects of the Great Depression. World War II blocked the gathering momentum, which was renewed during the lean post-war era and blossomed during the prosperous years of full employment during the 1950s and 1960s. Modern Movement design generated excitement as NSW returned to the promise of economic prosperity and social equality for all after twenty or so years of depression, social inequity and war.

By the beginning of the 1970s negative reactions to Modern Movement architecture and what it was seen to represent had set in because of social and political factors gathering force during the 1960s. More and more people questioned the beliefs underlying growth and prosperity after World War II. Nevertheless, the Modern Movement didn’t go away and in one form or another it has remained part of our cities and towns up to the present time.

This essay is the combined effort of landscape heritage consultant Colleen Morris, historian Professor Peter Spearritt and heritage consultant Dr Roy Lumby assisted by David de Rozenker-Apted (Hericon Consulting). It could not have been written without the generous assistance and encouragement of a number of people, including Dr Noni Boyd, Dr Barbara Buchanan, Professor Richard Clough, Cassandra Collins, Susan Duyker, Dr Bronwyn Hanna, Anne Higham, Nonie Hodgson, David Jackson, Megan Jones, Alex Kibble, Bruce Mackenzie, Howard Tanner, Louise Thom, Cameron White and staff at the City of Sydney Archives.

The following abbreviations have been used in the essay:

- CSA City of Sydney Archives
- NAA National Archives of Australia
- NLA National Library of Australia
- RAIA Royal Australian Institute of Architects
- SLNSW State Library of NSW
- SLV State Library of Victoria
WHAT IS THE MODERN MOVEMENT?
Roy Lumby

The Modern Movement produced some of the twentieth century’s most significant architecture. Broadly speaking it is based on progressive European and American architectural ideals from the period 1900 to 1940. There were several avant-garde art and architecture movements in this period. They included Futurism in Italy, Constructivism in Russia, Expressionism and the Bauhaus school of design in Germany and De Stijl in Holland. Advanced American thought was represented by the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright. Their various influences spread around the world. Architects saw themselves as reformers, reacting to social, political and economic upheaval during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries resulting from causes such as industrialisation and the shattering impact of World War I.

Generally, the characteristics of Modern Movement architecture included geometric cubistic forms that looked as though they could have been machine-made, a preference of “skeletal” forms – framed systems rather than monolithic masonry that enabled open planning, a fully resolved architecture where buildings were meant to be seen as a free-standing object, asymmetry rather than symmetry, and clear expression of function. Ornament was dispensed with and the appearance of surfaces and sun shading devices were thought sufficient to provide visual interest, although murals sometimes formed coherent decorative schemes. The socially aware side of the Modern Movement can be seen in the advanced, carefully designed public housing projects built in Germany and other parts of Europe – providing well-designed architecture for everyone was thought to be a significant way to improve people.

From the 1920s to the mid-1960s there was an optimistic belief that industrial technology, applied rationally to architecture and urbanism, would produce a much better world. The Modern Movement promoted the new, rejecting historical styles. Aspects of Modern Movement architecture such as lightweight construction techniques using modular building components, new building materials and flexible planning aided by framed construction were interpreted as the essence of Modern Movement architecture and labelled the “International Style” after a 1932 exhibition at New York’s Museum of Modern Art. The functional and social concerns of Europeans were ignored as the Modern Movement was adapted by a rather more affluent, individualistic society as a set of stylistic principles.

Influential architects such as Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe and Marcel Breuer moved to America after fleeing Europe to escape Nazism. Their influence on American architecture had a profound effect on the Modern Movement, which became the optimistic expression of post-war recovery and progress towards the future. Modern Movement architecture via America became the global architecture of choice.

In England and Australia the less radical modern brick work of architect Willem Dudok gained a solid following during the 1930s. A soft Modern Movement architecture emerged around World War II. Dubbed New Empiricism, it followed Scandinavian examples where Modern Movement structural concepts and planning were integrated with local materials and characteristics such as colour, and everyday elements such as pitched roofs. It was seen as the Modern Movement made humane, admired by many architects in post-war Britain and Australia.
In the first half of the 1950s young architects in NSW developed a regional version of the Modern Movement. Commonly called the Sydney School, it was not a unified style but reflected shared approaches to architecture. Although Modern Movement fundamentals such as open planning, honest expression of materials and structure, and maximising sunlight and fresh air were accepted, they looked to sources such as the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright and highly influential Finnish architect Alvar Aalto, and traditional Japanese architecture for inspiration. The Sydney School shared affinities with regional American West Coast architecture, where local building materials and construction techniques were used. In NSW great use was made of everyday materials such as timber, bricks and tiles. Buildings were integrated with natural settings and respected climatic conditions.

At the same time another strand of the Modern Movement emerged. This was the confrontingly named Brutalism, in general terms influenced by English architects Peter and Alison Smithson. They aimed to create socially responsible architecture that frankly expressed materials, structures and services. Brutalism was also strongly influenced by the work of important French architect Le Corbusier, who designed very powerful concrete buildings after World War II. Modern Movement architecture now became expressive and Brutalism spread around the world. It was adopted by Australian architects during the 1960s and became a tool for exploring new concrete construction methods, finding its way into large-scaled educational and public buildings. Brutalism touched the Sydney School - one result was the sensitive integration of public architecture and landscape.

A Modern Movement offshoot emerged in America at the end of the 1940s. Named Googie after a Los Angeles coffee shop, it was exuberant and very commercial. Respected architects exploited geometric structures and flowing spaces, combining the latest structural systems and materials.¹ Googie’s enjoyable influence infiltrated NSW’s commercial arena.

So, Modern Movement architecture in NSW is a regional manifestation of an important, evolving international approach to design. How and why it developed here and the ways it impacted on all sorts of building types is the subject of the following essay.
HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT
Peter Spearritt
When the Sydney Harbour Bridge opened in March 1932 it served as a symbol for a return to better times. The world-wide depression hit Australia hard, with little demand for the nation’s main exports, wool and wheat. Rural workers took to the road, relying on both hand outs and the odd job. In the cities tens of thousands lost their jobs. Over 5000 men had worked building the Bridge, but after completion no one wanted or needed to hire dogmen or riveters.

While built by a British firm, Dorman Long, the Bridge, at the insistence of the NSW government that paid for it, did call for Australian materials, most notably in the Moruya granite of the pylons, a decorative feature, not an integral part of the construction. Hailed as a product of the industrial age, and a triumph of British engineering, the Bridge was not modern in an architectural sense. Its steel arch design had been used in the Hell’s Gate railway bridge in New York, planned before the outbreak of World War I, and opened in 1915. The most modern aspect of the Bridge was not the design nor the construction, but the fact that Sydney’s new suburban electric trains would use it.

The trams had long been electrified but the trains had not. No longer would dirty stream trains ply the railway routes from Central to the suburbs. And Sydney would also get an underground railway, enabling passengers to get to the north shore without using the old fashioned ferries that plied between Circular Quay and Milson’s Point.

In the late 1930s most people continued to live in detached houses, a majority were tenants and the dwellings they lived in were made of brick or wood, though a new, cheap material, asbestos sheeting was coming onto the market. Thousands of people still lived in makeshift homes, from ‘blacks’ camps’ on the outskirts of some of the larger country towns, to the depression camps that sprung up, not least for people evicted from their homes. River banks often housed the very poor, one of the largest on the banks of the Hunter River near Hexham. There, even in the 1950s, tin humpies were the main form of accommodation.

In Sydney, the in-fill of terrace house balconies during the depression continued, and larger terraces often housed a number of families, with makeshift kitchens and illegal wiring servicing many of the new electrical appliances. Typically, these appliances were run off ceiling light fittings, as the terraces – built in the gas age – had never properly been rewired, other than for lighting. Fires were relatively common. Though allegedly protected by the landlord and tenant act, cheaper rental housing in Sydney and in the country towns was very poorly maintained, in terms of both electricity safety and appropriate sanitation standards. When you entered a poor part of Sydney or a rundown area in a country town the run down houses were a sure sign that you were in a working class neighbourhood.

At the other end of the spectrum, the middle class took advantage of cheap building costs during the depression, as did the breweries with new or renovated pubs, along with the backers of the greatest indoor leisure activity of the day, the cinema proprietors. They were busy installing sound equipment and building ever more lavish cinemas, not only in the city centre, but in the suburbs and the country towns. Almost every country town in New South Wales had some form of a cinema by the late 1930s, either purpose built or a locally owned hall, sometimes municipally owned, that housed the rather substantial projection equipment then needed for movie presentations.

Only one in five families could afford their own motor vehicle, but some people also had access to motor transport via their work, be it bread delivery, a milk truck or warehousing. Horses were still common in most country towns.
Indeed the equipment used to excavate the Sydney underground railway tunnels in Hyde Park in the 1920s had been horse drawn. And horse drawn vehicles were still officially counted over the Harbour Bridge, in the early years of counting traffic after the opening in March 1932. Despite such indications of backwardness, the Bridge did become a symbol of Australia’s prospective industrial capacity.

While many houses could garage a vehicle, properly built garages, usually in brick, with a tile roof, were the preserve of the better off. Vehicles were usually parked in the street, but this created chaos in many of Sydney’s narrow streets, both in the city and in the inner suburbs. King St Newtown, with its narrow lanes and tramway tracks, was a nightmare. Following the mini flat boom of the 1920s, when three storey blocks of flats were made to look like oversized English cottages with leadlight windows, the Art Deco flats of the latter half of the 1930s were more streamlined, but again very few garages were provided. Blocks of up to twelve flats often had only two garages. Only the grandest and most expensive blocks, primarily in the eastern suburbs, purported to provide one car space per flat. Blocks of flats also appeared in major regional cities, most notably in Newcastle and Wollongong. Even country towns, from Murwillumbah in the north to Bega in the south, saw small blocks of flats built near the centre of town.

Demands for modernity in the 1930s largely revolved around getting rid of slums - the old, decaying terrace houses of the inner suburbs – and getting rid of convict built structures, like the Commissariat Store at Circular Quay, which made way for a new building for the Maritime Services Board. Few regretted its passing. Circular Quay and Macquarie St - the Quay at the time being very rundown after the opening of the harbour bridge and the decimation of the ferry trade – were going to be raised and rebuilt. There was even talk of a new parliament house, worthy of Australia’s largest city, rather than a converted rum hospital. Sydney had never recovered from the embarrassment of the new federal parliament sitting in Victoria’s handsome gold era Parliament House until the provisional parliament house opened in Canberra in 1927.

New hotels, department stores and office blocks were planned in the interwar years but only a few were built, including the DJs Elizabeth St store, opened in 1926 to co-inside with the opening of the St James and Museums stations of the underground railway, and DJ’s Market St store, opened in the mid 1930s, linked to the other by an underground staff and goods roadway. Grace Brothers built a new store at Clarence St, recognising that new emporia were concentrating in the city centre. But the brand new building got taken over for war purposes, and became an office block, not a department store after the war.

Grace Brothers realised the importance of expanding to suburban centres well before Farmers and DJs understood that, establishing stores in Parramatta and Bondi in 1933 by taking over existing buildings. These stores would act as ‘showrooms’ for their vast emporium in Broadway, growing ever more marginal, because the locus of retailing was moving away from Central Station (Marks Foy’s being directly opposite it) to the fashionable new underground stations in the city centre.
Post-war Demands for Modernity

World War II put on hold generational aspirations that had formed during the depression. Australians wanted a home of their own, in the words of Building magazine proprietor Florence Taylor, “own a little of the land you love.” They wanted electricity, increasingly marketed as cleaner, safer and healthier than gas, they wanted all the new appliances and they wanted steady employment. Unemployment, which in some inner suburbs of Sydney reached more than 50 per cent during the depression, never fell below ten per cent in the 1930s, and that figure is just for “male breadwinners.” Most women did not expect to secure paid employment, except for the first few years after leaving school. In some cases, like teaching, women were not allowed to work once they had married.

Both men and women returning from the war demanded a better life. They expected a new house, which many eventually got, courtesy of both forty year low interest loans for war veterans and a boom in owner building. Land was cheap and often subdivisions, even on the north shore, had only tracks rather than made roads in the first instance. While most blocks had access to water, few were sewered. That significantly lowered the price of entry into the land market. People serving in the army had read their mass circulation magazine Salt throughout the war years, which carried many articles on how to build a new home and gave advice about what modern architecture could offer to new owner builders. This movement is well summed up in Walter Bunning’s brilliantly title book Homes in the Sun, which explained how to place a house on a site to maximise winter sun and minimise summer heat, plus advice on layout, bedrooms, kitchens and bathrooms. Hundreds of advice booklets were produced by both the building industry and commercial publishers, along with building materials manufacturers, including James Hardie and Wunderlich.
Scores of house design booklets, with template plans from architects, were published in the 1950s, and avidly taken up by owner builders. This book was also accompanied by a survey of what kind of house the Australian public wanted. Ninety per cent opted for single storey, 84 per cent wanted a verandah, 50 per cent wanted a separate dining room, and two thirds of respondents wanted built-in wardrobes in the bedrooms. Sydney Ancher’s design attempted to minimise passageways to create as open a design as possible, along with whole sections of floor to ceiling glass, eight foot ceilings to cut costs, and a flat roof. Sun Newspaper, Melbourne, c.1955 (Peter Spearritt collection).

Home ownership didn’t come quickly. There had been strict building regulations during the war and almost no house building. Pent up demand was everywhere. Rent control meant that landlords had lost interest, let alone financial incentive, to maintain their properties. Thousands of terraces in Sydney had no proper bathing facilities and the outdoor toilets down the back were virtual ruins. One of the reasons why the anti-slum campaigners were so successful in Sydney is that you could take photographs – for government reports – at the back of almost any terrace house street in inner Sydney and reveal third world conditions. All the churches - both Catholic and Protestant – denounced the slums, one of the few things they agreed on. Slum demolition entered the party platforms of both the ALP and the non-Labor parties (United Australia Party, then Liberal Party).

All state governments and the federal government started planning for an era of post war reconstruction well before the end of the war. The non-Labor NSW Government had already built a model village, with two storey blocks of flats, in Erskineville in the late 1930s. Government officials knew that existing housing stocks were run down and they could readily predict the enormous pent up demand for ‘homes for heroes’ as the troops returned.
All state governments set up Housing Commissions, but only the NSW and Victorian governments faced vast swathes of inner city “slums.” The NSW Housing Commission started demolishing slums from North Sydney to Balmain, and replaced them both with high rise blocks (Greenway Flats, North Sydney) and three storey walk ups. To modern eyes these walk ups, especially in Balmain and Manly, with their fantastic harbour views, seem anomalous. But they were built to the same plan as the walk ups in Alexandria and Waterloo. To gain access to such housing you had to go on a waiting list and have your income and family circumstances assessed.

The great majority of dwellings built by the NSW Housing Commission were detached houses. In country towns most were of wood and usually pretty well located to existing services. In Sydney, Newcastle and Wollongong the houses were often in fringe suburbs were land was cheap. Toilets were still usually down the backyard, and in the first instance, often serviced by a night soil collector, satirised in song by primary school kids as “Dan, Dan, the Dunnycan man.” All these commission houses were rented in the first instance, but successive changes in the Commonwealth State Housing Agreement saw many of them sold off to sitting tenants over the next twenty years.

The Impact of the Car

One of the reasons why Menzies won the 1949 federal election is that the new federal Liberal Party promised to get rid of petrol rationing and other forms of rationing, including building materials. Menzies read the post-war mood correctly; every male head of household wanted a car. Very few women could drive, but any young adult male who didn’t at least dream of getting a car was a social outcast. Car ownership rose rapidly, but with excellent rail and tram and bus networks, most workers continued to use public transport to get to work. Children still cycled or walked to school. Until the mid 1950s most Sydneysiders lived within a fifteen minute walk of public transport, whether tram, rail or bus. Most jobs were still in or near the city centre. The city dominated retailing and office work, including government jobs. All the great wharves, including Woolloomooloo and Pyrmont were close by and the fruit and vegetable markets were at the Haymarket, just near central. Manufacturing clustered in the inner western and southern suburbs. Alexandria styled itself as “the Birmingham of Australia,” while Kurnell housed the oil refinery.

The car played havoc with traditional patterns of public transport. Suddenly adult males could travel anywhere the road would take them. Wives could be driven to the shops, children could be dropped off at Sunday school, while their fathers, if they hung about at all, simply stayed in the car and read the weekend papers. The NRMA, founded in NSW in the 1920s, became a powerful lobby group demanding that motorists’ rights be respected, and that Sydney get rid of the trams that clogged its narrow streets. The argument appealed to a NSW state Labor government (they remained in power until 1965) because buses were seen as a cheaper alternative. There was no fixed route system to maintain and already private bus companies had sprung up in many country towns. The tramway unions were pacified with promises of jobs on the buses. So Sydney and Newcastle, which both had extensive tramway systems, got bus routes in their place. But most other large rural cities got nothing; they had to rely on private bus firms. Melbourne kept its trams, because it had wider streets, many more tramway rights of way than Sydney, and the RACV proved a polite lobbyist, unlike the NRMA which revelled in exercising political muscle. Sydney had relatively few tramway reservations - where trams were not competing directly with cars for road space – but the reservation abutting Anzac Parade showed the great merits of a right of way, efficiently disgorging tens of thousands to the SCG, then also the site of the Royal Easter Show.
When the Leeton Industrial Development Committee produced this tourist brochure in the late 1960s they emphasised the facilities and the many attractions of Leeton, from its public hospital to its racecourse. Produced in the rather racy graphic style of the era, the only modern building to take centre stage is the Riverina Motel, replete with colourful umbrellas and smart, stylised cars (Peter Spearritt Collection).

The car took society by storm, in the first instance as a leisure device. Dad took the family on Sunday drives, to the Blue Mountains, or even to look at housing options on new estates then being vigorously marketed. Drive-in cinemas were popular, not least because young couples could cavort beyond parental supervision, or even the supervision of ushers in the local cinema. Drive-in cinemas were also popular with parents, because they could deposit their offspring in the playgrounds, near the food outlet or underneath the huge outdoor screen. Motels, simply meaning “motor hotel,” sprung up first in country towns, then in seaside resorts and in the larger cities. New South Wales can lay claim to having the first motels in Australia, though there are definitional issues at stake here. Motels provided off street parking, often abutting the room/unit, and en suite facilities. By 1955 Orange, Wagga Wagga and Bathurst all boasted motels, with Surfers Paradise and
Port Macquarie following hot on their heels. By 1960 Port Macquarie had 11 motels. While not on the Pacific Highway, it became a convenient stopping off point or destination for holiday makers travelling north of Sydney.

These single storey motels usually had glamorous advertising hoardings, often with neon signs. Motels had much more in common with modern petrol stations than traditional hotels, which were usually at least two storeys high, with the bar on the ground floor, and accommodation above, very little of it with private bathing facilities. But to see the surrounding landscape from most of these motels, with their rooms normally facing an internal parking area so you could keep your vehicle in full view, you had to climb on the toilet pedestal and peer through the tiny window above. These car-centred structures were to be found everywhere, except the traditional guest house capitals, like Katoomba, which resisted for a while, but eventually succumbed, as we see in the Three Sisters Motel at Echo Point. Broken Hill held out for much longer, having a surplus of traditional hotel beds. Like the drive-in, motels were less intrusive on courting couples than cinemas or guest houses. You were much less likely to be quizzed about your marital status at a motel than at a guest house or hotel. The car accelerated the post-war baby boom in Australia.

Beachside holiday houses were among the most ambitious residential constructions in NSW in the 1960s. Often on quite large blocks, the architects and builders could site the house to good advantage, especially if it was one of the first in the development. Marketed primarily to Canberra residents, the Malua Beach estate, just out from Bateman’s Bay, promised natural bushland, some waterfront blocks, and colourful, clean, 1960s design (Peter Spearritt Collection).
In the large cities, especially Sydney, growing car ownership and car use created havoc on the roads. Central Sydney had long been congested, and even removing the trams didn’t help all that much. The Department of Motor Transport produced successive transport plans and new bridge and freeway proposals. Some were sensible and well thought out; others involved vast amounts of demolition and often simply moved the traffic jam from one place to another. The elegant Gladesville Bridge and associated works, including the Tarban Creek Bridge, linked parts of the lower north shore to the inner western suburbs and took pressure off the Harbour Bridge, then bursting at the seams. The building of a multi-lane freeway north of Sydney, including another road bridge over the Hawkesbury River, proved the great construction project of the 1960s, with vast quantities of sandstone blasted out of the hillsides and reused in the valleys. Sydneysiders wanting to escape the city on the weekends, whether to the Central Coast or beyond, marvelled at the engineering feat. Less spectacular, but equally important for those wishing to escape the city to the south was the Captain Cook Bridge over the Georges River, which took pressure off the traditional Princes Highway route and the appropriately named ‘Tom Ugly’s Bridge’. This new route and the subsequent freeway to Wollongong, along the escarpment, enabled not only holiday makers but work commuting, especially in reverse. Residents of communities north of Wollongong could now commute to jobs in southern Sydney. They had been able to do this by rail for some decades, but women travelling at night much preferred the safety of their own vehicle.

In Newcastle a new bridge, not replacing an old one, enabled a direct route between Stockton and the city Centre. Motorists and their passengers no longer had to queue for the giant vehicular ferries that used to ply this route. The Pacific Highway from Sydney heading north still had some vehicular ferries well into the 1960s, much of it poorly sealed. Even the Hume Highway, the single most trafficked route in the nation, was in a bad way. Until the 1980s most country towns, including Goulburn, were not bypassed, so the highway cut right through the middle of many a country town. Motel guests had to put up with truck noise all night, and local residents took their lives in their hands when crossing their main streets. The petrol companies loved to find new sites for their stations in this era, particularly lucrative because petrol pricing was controlled and there was no discounting. Some of the finest streets in our major country towns were, at least temporarily, degraded by the onset of car and truck traffic. Smaller country towns, including Tarcutta and Holbrook, embraced the traffic as their financial lifeblood. The Holbrook bypass, opened in 2013, became the last of 409 towns to be bypassed on the Hume. On the Pacific Highway some towns, most notably Bangalow, maintained the dignity of their main street, but the route through Bulahdelah and Brunswick Heads was given over to the architecture of the highway: cheaply built motels, petrol stations and grotty cafes. A handful of motels did have architectural merit, most notably Robin Boyd’s Black Dolphin Motel at Merimbula, which, magically, offered one room for parents and another for children, by the device of a bathroom separating both.

While motorists appreciated the faster travel times that the much improved highways offered for inter and intrastate travel, in Sydney some of the new freeway proposals involved vast amounts of demolition, including the Warringah Freeway at North Sydney, feeding into the Harbour Bridge, and the ‘Western Distributor’ taking traffic that would otherwise have gone via the CBD, on suspended roadways past Darling Harbour. The vast Warringah expressway involved the demolition of hundreds of houses built between the 1880s and the 1950s, including terrace houses and even some blocks of flats. It obliterated entire streets and created an impenetrable barrier between the North Sydney business district and Neutral Bay.
The Warringah Expressway carved its way through North Sydney, the Greenway public housing flats on the left, the Opera House still under construction, along with the first two high rise office blocks at Kirribilli, overlooking Luna Park (Peter Spearritt Collection, postcard c.1967).

The office blocks that later towered above it benefitted from spectacular views that would never be built out, but the impact on the community went almost unremarked. Many of the residents were tenants, with virtually no political power, and the landlords in general simply took the compensation offered to them by the DMR. In the 1960s and 1970s the phrase ‘DMR affected’ put a chill down the spine of many a potential home buyer. The house might be cheap, but you might not have it for long.
Sydney wakes up

The Pylon Lookout remained the most popular lookout in Sydney until the opening of the first AMP skyscraper in 1961. That in turn was replaced by the observation desk on Harry Seidler’s Australian Square circular tower block. The Moruya granite pylons are filthy, at a time when Sydney embraced new clean structures but thought all pre-war structures of little interest. Brochure c.1965, just before the introduction of decimal currency, hence the 20 cents, 2 shilling price insignia (Peter Spearritt collection).

In the 1950s Sydney was filthy. The Harbour Bridge pylons, as contemporary postcards show, were covered in grime. Circular Quay had never recovered from the loss of the fifty million ferry passengers a year it serviced until the coming of the Harbour Bridge. The hotels, including the ‘First and Last’ were rough male venues. Women would not walk around the area at night, nor would they venture into the Rocks, an increasingly decrepit area, despite the major road and building reforms that had come after the outbreak of plague in the early 1900s. Successive state Labor governments were getting more and more embarrassed by the state of the city and set about some key building projects and one major international competition, for an Opera House. The Overseas Terminal at Circular Quay, opened in 1962, was meant to service the P&O and other liners bringing thousands of European migrants to our shores and enabling young Australian adults to visit the mother country. But the year it opened was the first year that more people travelled to Australia by aeroplane than by ship. Nonetheless the Overseas terminal was seen in Sydney at the time at the apex of modernity, with its strong lines and coloured panels. On the other site of Circular Quay the government had ordered the demolition of the Bennelong Tram Terminus to make way for the winning tender for a Sydney Opera House, by a young Danish architect, Joern Utzon. Sydneysiders marvelled as the opera house rose from its spectacular harbourside setting. The cartoonist Emile Mercier offered his working class wives, chatting over their decayed back fences, umbrellas in the shape of the Opera House, well before Barry Humphries appropriated it for Dame Edna’s hats.
Building activity was also picking up on the landward site of Circular Quay. The AMP society, a household name to generations of Australians, announced that it would build a 26 storey office headquarters right at the Quay. This was now feasible because the 150 foot height limited regulations had been removed in 1957. At that time the Sydney skyline was still dominated by the squat but impressive sandstone government offices and masonry warehouses, dating from the 1880s. The most notable symbol of modernity, the AWA TOWER, represented the might of the newly emerging manufacturing industries. Amalgamated Wireless Australasia manufactured all manner of electrical goods at its factory in Homebush, not least the wireless, the source of entertainment in every home. The steel tower, which people could ascend in a lift, offered commanding views of the city as did the Pylon Lookout, the most visited attraction in the city at the time. Aware of this, the AMP society wanted an observation deck on top of their new office block. School children regarded this as the pinnacle of a modern city. Back on ground level the city streets were alive with the sounds of jackhammers and demolition. The arcades inhabited by stamp dealers, little cafes and book shops were swept away, and just up the road, between George and Pitt Streets, a score of buildings were being demolished to make way for Australian Square Tower, a fifty storey circular office block designed by Harry Seidler that would quickly supplant the AMP headquarters in the height stakes. Australia Square was even to boast a revolving restaurant, far more swish than the only other one at the time, the somewhat battered establishment at Echo Point, overlooking the Three Sisters.
This brochure, on the observation deck of the Australia Square Tower, didn’t even mention the name of the architect. But it did explain that the building ‘was redeveloped from a tangle of 30 obsolescent properties in the most congested part of downtown Sydney’, and bragged that the Summit Restaurant, on the 47th floor, was ‘the largest revolving restaurant in the world’ (Peter Spearritt collection).

Qantas, on the front panel of this brochure, choose to celebrate the AMP skyscraper as the symbol of modern Sydney, overshadowing the remnant AWA Tower to be seen in the background. The harbour offered international visitors visions of maritime healthiness (Peter Spearritt Collection).

While the city centre saw most of the action, large building plans were also afoot for North Sydney, just a few minutes by train from Wynyard Station. North Sydney had the advantage, from the north shore perspective, that you didn’t have to drive over the Harbour Bridge to get to work. The MLC insurance company, not to be outdone by the plans of the AMP, plotted its own elegant office block at North Sydney, complete with shops on the ground level and a handsome set back forecourt. This building paved the way for North Sydney to become a second CBD. Other office blocks soon followed. North Sydney kept fewer of its historical buildings than some parts of the CBD, so at times in the 1960s and 1970s it seemed the most modern part of the entire city.

The whole issue of what historical buildings should be kept had, until the 1970s, largely been the preserve of the National Trust, a non-profit autonomous body set up under state government legislation in 1945. When the scale of freeway plans became obvious residents and urban professionals were galvanised about the fate of a number of key locations, including
Woolloomooloo and the Rocks. In the 1960s the Paddington Society had effectively mobilised to save many terrace houses and local activists were inspired about the potential power of community campaigns. Balmain also became a hotbed of middle class preservation, as did Hunter’s Hill. The Askin Liberal government, which came to power in 1965, sought deals with both banks and developers to level most of the Rocks and replace it with high rise hotels and office blocks. Because the government owned most of the land in the Rocks area it had the upper hand. After voluble protests and critical support from the BLF green bans, much of the Rocks and Woolloomooloo survived the latter with new in-fill public housing paid for by the Whitlam federal Labor government (1972–75). The Rocks saw an intriguing accommodation between the protestors, including residents, mostly tenants, and well-organised urban professionals, including architects and town planners. Much of the housing and mercantile building stock would remain, with a low rise hotel near the Bridge, the Park Hyatt, and a telling, but restrained new hotel, The Regent (now the Four Seasons) designed by Michael Dysart, on George Street, overlooking the Quay. Finally Sydney had a distinctive modern hotel, less imitative than the Hilton up the road, and more stylish than the Wentworth, the only other major new hotels of the time.

Ironically, many of the great office blocks of the late 1960s and 1970s, have either been demolished, including the State Office Block, or turned into apartments, like the IBM Tower at the southern approaches to the Harbour Bridge. The Overseas Terminal gets regular revamps, and Circular Quay East has been given over to wealthy apartment owners and well-heeled short term tourists. Only the pavement there remains a democratic space.

To the Suburbs: Industry, Retailing, Schools and the New Universities

While insurance companies, banks and government departments continued to focus their head office attention on the city and North Sydney, the retailers had long realised that they had to move out. Following American models, all the retailers embraced huge, car-based shopping centres. A small one opened at Top Ryde in 1957 but Brisbane became the first Australian city to have a full-scale drive in shopping centre at Chermside, ten kilometres from the city centre. Because Brisbane was the only capital city with a metropolitan-wide council, it could give planning approval without being bothered by adjoining municipalities agonising about the impact of such huge new installations on traditional shopping streets. Grace Brothers opened a mall in Chatswood in 1961 with parking for three thousand cars. Warringah Mall followed shortly after and in 1965 Bankstown and Canterbury got Roselands, half a million potential customers within a twenty minute drive. The old city emporia were gradually abandoned, including Grace Brothers on Broadway and Anthony Hordern’s, commanding a huge city block between Pitt and George Streets.

Industry was on the move too. New industries, like car manufactures, didn’t ever bother to set up in the inner suburbs. GMH set itself up at Pagewood, Ford at Homebush and BMC abutting the giant Australian Glass plant at Moore Park. All this happened in the 1930s, at a time when new power stations were still being built where the customers were, not where the fuel supplies were. By the 1950s industries had abandoned the time honoured model of multi-storey buildings with all activities on the one site, like the WD and HO Wills cigarette factory at Moore Park. New industrial concerns wanted vast amounts of land and no longer cared much about being connected to the rail network. The rise and rise of the truck underpinned this move. The fruit and vegetable wholesale markets had moved to Flemington by 1975, and all the old inner city breweries were being eyed off for redevelopment. The new breweries went to the suburbs. The old inner city breweries succumbed to office blocks, or more recently, apartment blocks.
Sometimes tiny remnants of the old structures were kept as a reminder of the colourful, now almost obliterated industries of inner Sydney.

The architects and builders of the new industrial and retailing centres, on their large plots of land, had quite a bit of room to manoeuvre, as did the architects of universities and colleges on new sites, most notably Macquarie University, Ku-ring-gai College of Advanced Education and the University of Newcastle, which moved from a near CBD site to bushy acreage. The architects and site planners could not only design all the buildings on these fresh sites, they could create courtyards and linking structures, often with great vistas. But they also had to fit in with the road system, as all these new campuses were heavily reliant on the car. When Macquarie University opened in 1966 (check) public transport was woeful. It remained so for the next three decades, and has only recently benefitted from a combination of the lobbying power of the computer giants located nearby, including Microsoft and the Macquarie Shopping Centre. Forty years after the University opened its door, it finally got a rail connection. The UNSW at Kensington, on a much more constrained site, still awaits its rail connection, long promised but never delivered.

With industry, wholesaling, retailing moving to the suburbs, parts of the old industrial city appeared redundant. Plans had long been afoot to redevelop the Haymarket and Darling Harbour. Once the wholesale markets had moved, the state government and private developers moved in. The Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences got a new home in the abandoned Ultimo power station, adaptively reused by architect Lionel Glendenning. The NSW government bankrolled a huge new convention centre, with a gimmicky monorail, which lasted just twenty five years before, belatedly, biting the dust. Entrepreneurial developers, with little training and even less taste, tried in Sydney to mimic re-use projects from other port cities redevelopment schemes, from Europe to North America.

While central Sydney was being redeveloped at breathtaking speed, sometimes interrupted by short-lived property recessions, the outer suburbs were also alive with building activity. The owner builders of the 1950s gradually gave way to big housing development companies who could deliver both house and land packages, which the banks were happy to lend on. In the 1960s these new releases of blocks – and pressure on the State Planning Authority to loosen the reins on the greenbelt that had been established by the Cumberland Country Plan - were subdivided with water and electricity, but never with gas, and rarely with connection to the sewer. Septic tanks were the order of the day in new subdivisions, not only in the west around Campbelltown but even in the outer reaches of the Warringah Shire. When the Whitlam Labor government was elected in 1972, tens of thousands of houses in Sydney were not connected to the sewer. The same was true in other rapidly growing cities, most notably Brisbane and Melbourne. The federal government actually paid to fix up substandard sanitation in the outer suburbs and some country towns, for the first and only time in the history of the federation.

New suburbs had very few facilities. While Education department planners might put aside land for new developments, they couldn’t get permission from the state treasury to build until they could establish an adequate catchment for both primary schools and high schools. The Catholic Church was so overwhelmed with its existing real estate base, with hundreds of often run down parochial schools in the older suburbs and country towns, that they were slow to build new schools. The backers of upper middle class private schools, well established in Sydney and some of the bigger country towns, including Armidale, didn’t see much prospect of a new clientele in the new suburbs.
Outer suburban families were hard pressed to meet their mortgages and couldn’t afford the fees that such schools charged.

So the state government was left to service the demands from these new suburbs, whether privately developed or creations of the New South Wales Housing Commission. In some of the latter, including Green Valley and Mt Druitt, at times half the population were under ten. Not only schools, but baby health centres had to be provided. Shops were left up to the private sector, and were often rudimentary in the first instance. Many suburban shopping strips have since been decimated by the rise and rise of the drive-in shopping centres.

The Wagga Wagga Civic Theatre, replete with its colourful mural, in its commanding position near the centre of town, harmonised, according to the Wagga Wagga City Council, with ‘the natural landscape’. Opened in 1963, the Civic Theatre established Wagga as a major regional centre. It already had a Teachers’ College, which later became the foundation for the Charles Sturt University (Peter Spearritt Collection).
The Religion of Leisure: Club Life, NSW style

As Sydney grew, and became more and more congested, the demand to escape the city became evermore pronounced. Before mass car ownership, Sydneysiders were happy to travel by rail to the Royal National Park in the south, the Blue Mountains and its guest house capital Katoomba to the west, while middle class home owners with cars could frequent Bobbin Head to the North. In the interwar years Sydneysiders till went to Manly or Coogee for a holiday and stayed in hotels or guest houses. After the war, motels sprang up on all the major highways leading from the city, and wealthier people built holiday houses and shacks, the latter usually in fibro. From the 1950s to the 1970s thousands of holiday cottages were built on the near north coast and the south coast. More substantial houses were also commissioned by retirees who had cashed in on the booming Sydney property market. Continuing waves of new migrants into Sydney, not only from Europe, but increasingly from Asia, fuelled demand for new housing in Sydney, and kept property prices rising.

But not all of the movement was out of the city or the bigger country towns. There were also demand for new facilities within the suburbs and towns. Most municipalities created public libraries in the 1950s and 1960s, some in existing buildings, particularly old Schools of Arts, but many in new structures, abutting other municipal activities. In Lane Cove, a new town hall, library and swimming pool sprung up on the same site in the early 1960s. It got the Bluett award for excellence in local government. No one commented adversely at the time that the money had come from selling off part of the Greenwich foreshore to oil companies for storage tanks.

Municipal swimming pools proliferated in both the suburbs and the country towns. Even small towns like Milton on the south coast got a swimming pool. And nearby Ulladulla, literally on the coast, also got a new pool, even though it had beaches aplenty within walking distance and a pre-existing ocean pool. Newcastle stuck with its oceans pools, and still does. But inland suburbs and the nearby coal villages all demanded municipal pools, as did riverside cities, including the flood-prone Maitland.

In the suburbs and the country towns most hotels were getting rather run down. They couldn’t compete for accommodation with the new motels, providing off-street parking and en suite facilities. There were enormous unmet demands for local drinking, eating and entertainment sites. The RSL, which already had modest branches in most country towns with populations of over 1000 and in the bigger suburbs, embraced this new opportunity. A retiring generation of World War II veterans had money to spend, not least because their artificially low interest rates on their 40 years home loans made many relatively well off. The NSW government abandoned six o’clock closing for hotels in 1955, and the following year allowed RSL and sporting clubs to serve liquor and install poker machines. Both men and women flocked to the new clubs which soon became money spinners. The clubs offered reasonably priced alcohol, subsidised meals, and often gym facilities, along with function rooms, and in some cases dedicated cinemas. Some of the larger clubs – the St George Leagues Club and the Rooty Hill RSL – literally became working class palaces which were so flash that middle class retirees also frequented them. More exclusive clubs had long existed for the professional classes and business people in the city. Some were redeveloped when they did contra deals with office block developers. Expensive golf clubs continued to cater for bankers, lawyers, doctors and other assorted business people. The Warragamba Dam, opened in 1960, enabled all these golf clubs to continue to water their greens with potable water at subsidised prices.
Clubs also welcomed women, who were still frowned upon in many a public bar, from working class suburbs in the cities to the time-honoured traditions of male drinking in the country towns. Not only did the clubs welcome women, many of whom had returned to the paid workforce so were themselves a source of cash at the bar and at the pokies, they also welcomed children. Some even created special rooms for younger kids to enjoy supervised play. Parents could eat, smoke and drink away, secure in the knowledge that their kids were safe.

In the NSW landscape, some of the grandest clubs appeared near the Queensland and Victorian borders, because poker machines were not legalised in those two states. On the NSW side of the Murray vast clubs arose above the river banks. On the Victorian side tiny RSL clubs closed early, offering nothing but a drink. Their members simply headed over the border at night and on weekends. At Tweed Heads what is now the gargantuan Twin Towers club, replete with its own apartment blocks, racked in the money. Bus tours from Melbourne to Albury and Brisbane to Tweed Heads garnered the willing punters to the joys of club life, NSW style.

Even traditional mining towns, including Broken Hill, and the steel making towns of Newcastle and Port Kembla got clubs, despite having a surfeit of traditional hotels. While Broken Hill had the usual RSL and sports clubs, it also saw the redevelopment of clubs with a political message, the most notable being the Social Democratic Club.

All the clubs survived the onset of TV, despite the claims of pundits at the time that Australians would now stay home for their entertainment, indeed that overseas travel would fall off, because why bother if you could see all those places from the comfort of your own lounge room. People still wanted to go out, and in an era before the introduction of Random Breath testing, many drove themselves home under the influence of alcohol, only detected if they were in an accident or encountered a sober spouse or partner on returning to their front door.

Today, in larger suburbs and country towns, the clubs are among the largest structures in the landscape. They are much better patronised than the churches and, from a secular perspective, they offer a greater range of activities, even if they don’t always tender to the soul. Nonetheless, new churches were built in the 1950s and 1960s, especially for new and growing religions. The seventh Day Adventists erected a vast edifice on Greenwich Road, while the nearby Presbyterians stuck with their turn of the century church. The Christian Scientists had already built an architecturally intriguing compound, replete with reading room, on Military Road in Mosman, while again the nearby Presbyterians just stuck with their old church. Once the newly formed Uniting church soaked up all of the Methodists, all of the Congregationalists and some of the Presbyterians, hundreds of churches laid idle, many since reused for residential or commercial purposes. The Anglicans and the Catholics tried to stick with all their real estate, but even they had to let smaller churches in the countryside go. And in the bigger country towns, with multiple Anglican and Catholic establishments, rationalisation proved necessary. In some suburbs and coastal towns, churches occasionally enjoyed a main street frontage that became so valuable that the appeal of mammon to church coffers could rarely be ignored.
From Flats and Home Units to Apartments

With the passing of the Strata Title Act by State Parliament in 1961, assiduously lobbied for by developers and real estate agents, it suddenly became possible to buy, in effect, the section of air space that a particular flat occupied. To mark the change developers and real estate agents started marketing flats as ‘home units’. Banks were much happier to lend on a mortgage for a property they could readily repossesses and resell than one constrained by the complex shareholding structure of the old company title system. Rarely has one piece of building and property legislation had so much impact on the urban landscape.

Suddenly two and three storey blocks of walk-up flats sprouted throughout the inner suburbs, usually near transport nodes, especially railway stations. New flat blocks, often in red texture brick, spouted near every major railway station within a few kilometres of the city centre. They could also be found along major road and bus routes, including the Pacific Highway from St Leonards to Chatswood. Here, on the southern side of the highway, they had spectacular views, and were often built to five or six storeys, when lifts became mandatory. Unlike the interwar flats, most of the new home unit blocks did provide off street parking. Sometimes the car parks were at ground level, and the block of flats didn’t start until the first floor, allowing architects a little largesse in their ground floor treatment (e.g. some blocks in Raglan St, Mosman), and allowing more garden space, important when marketing to the middle class. Other treatments were much more conventional. On larger, cheaper blocks in the western suburbs the garages could often simply be built as a separate structure out the back.

Most of these flats had one or two bedrooms, and at the time very few had more than one bathroom. Three bedroom flats were usually only found in wealthier suburbs on the lower north shore and the inner east, for instance along Military Road in Mosman, where they often commanded spectacular harbour views. By the late 1960s and early 1970s major building and development companies had realised that Sydneysiders had an insatiable demand for views of the Harbour. The Harbour Bridge pylons were now being regularly steam cleaned, the Bridge itself went from being a symbol of traffic congestion to the City’s much loved icon, new ferries were introduced and the Harbour view became the focus of the rich and pretenders. In the late 1960s a block of land in Wahroonga cost more than a block of land with a harbour view in Greenwich or Mosman. Within a decade, Harbour views commanded at least twice the price of one of the traditional lairs of the upper middle classes, the upper north shore line. High rise apartment blocks soon came to dominate the skyline in North Sydney, Elizabeth Bay and Potts Point. Some harbourside locations resisted the trend, including Vaucluse and Rose Bay, but even Mosman got some high rise blocks. Manly went high rise promptly, Bondi more or less resisted, and Coogee had a bet each way.
Modernity in New South Wales

In the 1950s and 1960s governments, business people, corporations, and most citizens evinced an unfettered faith in modernity. School textbooks were full of accounts of the mighty Snowy Mountains Scheme and school excursions there were common. Harnessing alpine waters for hydroelectricity seemed both harmless and modern, with little thought given at the time to the environmental costs of tunnelling, creating new dams or diverting the natural flow of water. And hydro power stations were pristine, unlike the coal-fired stations of old. Warragamba Dam, the dam that would make Sydney drought-proof, got enormous publicity in the newspaper press of the day. Most Sydney children got to see it under construction or on completion on either a school trip or a family Sunday drive.

Flourishing industries, from the steelworks of Port Kembla and Newcastle, to the motor plants of Ford and Holden, were ample evidence of the industrial future of the state, which had an unlimited supply of coal from the Hunter Valley to the Illawarra. New freeways criss-crossed the landscape, making industry less reliant on rail links and ever-larger modern trucks a curse of modern life. More than half of all our cars were made in Australia, with the Holden taking the nation by storm in the 1950s, followed by the Falcon in the 1960s. Australians needed big cars for a big country.
The cities and the country towns and the new suburbs in both were powered by electricity from power stations that had moved from where the customers were (on the foreshores of Sydney Harbour and Botany Bay) to where the coal supplies were, in both the Hunter Valley and the Illawarra.

Proof that New South Wales could boast of being the most architecturally adventurous state could be found at many levels, from the state government sponsored Sydney Opera House, to the high rise office blocks in the city centre and high rise apartment blocks in nearby, well-heeled suburbs. Many boasted magnificent harbour views. Sydney continued to grow in every direction, and only the national parks and aggressive topography stopped Sydney joining up with Newcastle, Wollongong or Katoomba.

At the same time, not all manifestations of modernity involved new buildings. Many country towns took down their verandas and veranda posts in their main streets for the 1954 royal visit because they were considered old fashioned. Scores of country railway stations were abandoned, as passenger travel ceased on most routes. Cinemas lay idle, often to be converted into furniture stores if they survived a fire, genuine or induced for insurance purposes. Landlords of commercial property gradually became more rapacious, and the new car-based shopping centres often linked turnover to the rental charged. Thousands of family business in the country towns and suburbs – including bakeries, hardware shops, manchester and small goods shops – couldn’t survive the onslaught of the supermarket. These closures often coincided with the opening of purpose-built supermarkets, as both Coles and Woolworths took up key positions in suburbs and country towns.

Some examples of modernist architecture have survived almost intact, from architect designed houses that are now regarded as heritage icons – most notably the Rose Seidler house – and many other houses were the owners appreciate the design integrity which they now celebrate. Churches built in the 1950s and 1960s tend to survive, not least as they we usually built in areas of new demand. Most petrol stations, except in some out of the way rural locations, have had a number of makeovers. Likewise cafes, which, unless much prized – including the heritage-listed Milk Bar in Broken Hill – remained subject to regular makeovers.

It is imperative that we save some of our most outstanding and/or representative examples of modernist architecture in New South Wales, both for its aesthetic qualities and to help us understand an era high on optimism, where architecturally designed structures were rarely the norm, but architects and builders, when working in relatively harmony, gave us some of our most memorable 20th century buildings.