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

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Prepared by
HeriCon Consulting in association with Colleen Morris and Peter Spearritt

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NSW’s post-war economic expansion is symbolised by tall office buildings. They capture the prevailing optimistic faith in development and Australia’s growing international stature. There was pressure to provide buildings for rapidly expanding business, so speculation accompanied rising land prices. Buildings housed multi-national corporations and local businesses, especially insurance companies, giving sound returns and an image of progressive prestige.

They also transformed cities through the destruction of older buildings and townscapes, changes to wind patterns, and overshadowing. They altered the way cities functioned, consumed more energy to feed air conditioning and lighting, and changed the work environment. They also shifted perceptions about what a modern city should be.  

Office buildings responded to evolving demands such as flexible internal subdivision, natural lighting and speedy construction. In the 1950s and early 1960s many were resplendently clothed in sheer aluminium and glass curtain walls, fulfilling early Modern Movement dreams of glass skyscrapers via America. Pietro Belluschi’s Equitable Building in Portland, Oregon, is a celebrated early example. Belluschi experimented with aluminium and aeroplane assembly techniques, ending up with an extraordinary, refined building standing apart from its staid neighbours. The best known is Skidmore, Owings & Merrill’s elegant Lever House in New York. Both show how Modern Movement architecture was turning to corporate ends, deflected from its social responsibility.
Sydney at this time took second place to Australia’s financial capital, Melbourne. However, it was home to major institutions such as the Commonwealth Bank, Bank of NSW and the AMP Society. Construction revived during 1952. Teams of consultants were involved – architects along with mechanical, structural, hydraulics and lighting engineers and quantity surveyors. Several buildings in NSW were designed by Melbourne-based architects such as Stephenson & Turner. Their Berger House in Elizabeth Street was completed in 1955. Its thin glassy curtain wall, the first in downtown Sydney, faced west. Some architects were already aware of heat gain. Harry Seidler’s Associated General Publications in Sussex Street was designed at the same time as Berger House but here adjustable storey-height aluminium blades were placed in front of recessed west-facing windows. Seidler would have encountered this type of response while working with Oscar Neimeyer, who was involved with Le Corbusier on the 1936-1943 Ministry of Education and Health Building in Rio de Janeiro. This was an acclaimed Modern Movement office block with adjustable horizontal louvres between vertical concrete screens to block the sun.

In the following years the curtain wall’s deficiencies were addressed by appropriate design for local conditions. Still, a brace of them appeared. One was the south-facing Commonwealth Bank in Market Street. Its aluminium curtain wall contrasted with planes of sandstone but more importantly, there was abstracted sculpture by Lyndon Dadswell and Gerald Lewers, continuing a 1930s tradition of symbolic sculpture on office buildings. Sculpture subsequently became widespread. The Society of Sculptors was founded in 1951 to advance the appreciation of sculpture and encourage its use. Foundation members included influential architects – Professor Denis Winston, (president) and Modern Movement stalwarts Sydney Ancher and Arthur Baldwinson. Architects also encouraged clients to commission sculpture. Public perceptions relating to status and patronage of the arts also helped.
Harry Seidler’s Associated General Publications in Sussex Street (left) and Stephenson & Turner’s Berger House in Elizabeth Street, both 1955 (Associated General Publications - Roy Lumby photograph; Berger House - CSA SRC 393. Image reproduced courtesy City of Sydney Archives)

Commonwealth Bank, Market, George and York Streets, designed by the Commonwealth Department of Works and completed in 1956. External artworks included the relief by Lyndon Dadswell, centre, and Gerald Lewers, right (Roy Lumby photographs).

An unprecedented number of office buildings reflecting the latest technology in finishes, style and structure rose over the next fifteen or so years. Some key examples are briefly described.

Eric Nicholls’ Caltex House in Kent Street (unrecognisably modified) marked the emergence of major developer Civil & Civic. By the standards of the day it was a large building, accommodating 2,000 persons plus 435 cars on lower levels. It was notable for reinforced concrete framing, uncommon in Sydney at this time - the vast majority of large city buildings were steel framed. Construction was rapid at one floor completed every 12 days. Shallow canopies shaded continuous window bands of windows. Caltex House exceeded the 45.72 metres height restriction that dated to 1912 because of level differences across its site. At the beginning of 1957 the AMP Society applied to the Chief Secretary for permission to exceed the height limit. Consent was duly given, legislation changed and the floodgates opened.
Peddle, Thorp & Walker's AMP Building in Alfred Street at Circular Quay stirred up a great deal of public debate on account of its height in that location and its curved facades, which actually prevented it becoming a blank box. The building embodied the most modern technology, along with AMP's new computer. The central circulation and services core allowed clear space around the building perimeter and helped it resist winds. Electronically programmed lifts moved people efficiently in peak periods. Spandrels in the aluminium framed curtain walls were heat-treated glass with gold dust fused into the back, while windows were double glazed. There was certainly art, with Tom Bass' sculpted corporate logo at the base of the building, and Gerald Lewers' fountain in the lobby. NSW's first free-standing skyscraper symbolised the AMP Society's wealth and prestige. It was the tallest building in Australia for a time with an immensely popular roof-top observation deck offering people a new vision of Sydney.

It wasn't all curtain walls. Stephenson & Turner's Temple House in Bligh Street was a radical departure. Its exterior was a grid of beams and columns with windows and glazed terracotta block spandrels set back between them. McConnel Smith & Johnson's Kindersley House, stretching between O'Connell and Bligh Streets, featured a lot of external stone across its well-proportioned exterior - travertine cladding, granite on ground floor columns and reconstructed granite spandrels. It was the tallest building constructed by the lift-slab technique in the world and introduced innovative little arcades by recessing the ground floor on both facades, then linked them with a pedestrian arcade. Bunning & Madden's exemplary Liner House in Bridge Street clung to the curtain wall but tempered it with louvred sun hoods shading windows, reducing air conditioning costs and helping window cleaners. Its structure allowed maximum clear internal space. It won the 1961 Sulman. Both Liner House and Kindersley House were enriched with Douglas Annand's decorative sculpture.
Peddle Thorp & Walker’s AMP Building at Circular Quay, 1962 (left) was the largest post-war office building development in this part of Sydney at the beginning of the 1960s. The central photograph shows some contemporaries viewed from the AMP Building – left to right, Stephenson & Turner’s Unilever House, 1957; Harry Seidler’s Lend Lease House, 1961; Bates Smart & McCutcheon’s ICI House, 1958, and Jorn Utzon’s Sydney Opera House, completed in 1973 and the only survivor. The photograph at right shows Tom Bass’ allegorical relief sculpture next to the Macquarie Street entrance of ICI House (left hand image - SLNSW Walkabout NSW photographs, Ern McQuillan photographer, digital order a383004; central image – NLA, Wolfgang Sievers photograph, nla.pic-an14156306-9-v; right hand image – NLA, Wolfgang Sievers photograph, nla.pic-an24965270-v).

Stephenson & Turner’s 1958 Temple House in Bligh Street for Legal & General, left; detail of the O’Connell Street façade of McConnel Smith & Johnson’s 1960 Kindersley House, centre; Bunning & Madden’s 1961 Liner House in Bridge Street. (Temple House - NAA, John Tanner photograph, A1200/L33554; Roy Lumby photographs).

Several outstanding buildings were completed in the 1960s. The assured State Office Block in Macquarie Street was one of NSW’s finest twentieth century office buildings. Designed in the Government Architect’s Branch (project architect Ken Woolley; demolished), it housed more than 2,100 public servants in a 33 storey tower with two low wings. Its central lift and services core stabilised the structure while an advanced hollow floor concealed services. Sun control was achieved by setting windows well back from columns and projecting floor slab edges, which were clad in bronze. This all gave the building immense presence, while its low sections related it to surrounding buildings.
McConnel Smith & Johnson’s influential Water Board extension on the corner of Pitt and Bathurst Streets innovated with precast concrete. Here the treatment on each side of the building reflected the plan and climatic conditions. The physical presence of the building is due to precast concrete used for sun control, coloured to harmonise with neighbours to give a sense of context. Extensive use of precast concrete became common in Sydney after this building was completed.

The real innovator was Harry Seidler’s Australia Square, designed in conjunction with Italian structural engineer Pier Luigi Nervi. 30 sites and several narrow streets were amalgamated and transformed into a sunny public plaza protected by a low-rise slab on Pitt Street. The handsome tower rising above George Street made innovative use of concrete construction. The whole concept was unprecedented and achieved the Modern Movement ideal of the tall tower surrounded by open space. More public squares followed in its wake in the 1970s, such as Town Hall Square off George Street and the MLC Centre, complemented by the “pedestrianising” of Martin Place.

Harry Seidler’s Australia Square, 1967: Clustered columns supporting the Plaza Building on Pitt Street, above), and the circular tower building, right (Roy Lumby photographs).

A couple of smaller office buildings in Surry Hills highlight the Modern Movement’s diversity in NSW. H P Oser, Fombertaux & Associates showroom and offices for Tooheys Limited in Mary Street summarises the curtain wall - wide expanses of glass divided with repetitive vertical frames, coloured spandrels and strong horizontal sunhoods. By way of contrast John James’ extraordinary Reader’s Digest Building in Waterloo Street achieves human scale through proportions based on the Fibonacci series across the entire building. Its meticulously finished, sculptural concrete is complemented by Douglas Annand’s cast iron artworks.
Two faces of the Modern Movement in Surry Hills: H P Oser, Fombertaux & Associates’ slick and engaging Toohey’s Limited offices and showroom, 1961 (left), and a portion of John James’ extraordinarily expressive and finely crafted Reader’s Digest Building, 1968 (Roy Lumby photographs).

Reader’s Digest Building details – Douglas Annand’s disconcerting decorative grilles and a crafted handrail and balustrade, all of which underscore the care and craftsmanship of the building (Roy Lumby photographs).

Large office buildings were certainly not confined to central Sydney. By the mid 1950s it was commonly thought that North Sydney should be Sydney’s twin. Early efforts included buildings in Miller Street - Stephenson & Turner’s two buildings for the AMP Society and Bates Smart & McCutcheon’s MLC Building, one of a nation-wide litter by them for this company. The MLC Building was at that time vast and full of superlatives - 3000 occupants, 3,556 tonnes of steel, 9,755 m² of curtain walls and ten 23 passenger lifts. Amenities included a canteen, billiards room, theatre, 2 squash courts and roof gardens. Heat from the eastern and western sun was countered by heavy-duty air conditioning, double-glazed curtain walls and 294 kilometres of venetian blind slats. Steel framing was stretched to its limits to provide maximum width and still have natural light in the middle of the building, assisted by the first-ever use of steel pan flooring. It exemplified slick corporate America transplanted to Sydney.
The sheer glass and aluminium slab of Stephenson & Turner’s massive 1957 MLC Building at North Sydney, introduced a new level of scale to NSW office buildings and also dominated its immediate environs. Hennessy, Hennessy & Co were architects in association (NAA image no. A1200, L24944; Roy Lumby photograph).

The 1956 AMP Building by Stephenson & Turner, a few doors down from the 1954 AMP Building by the same architects in Miller Street, North Sydney (NLA, Wolfgang Sievers photograph, nla.pic-an14156869-5-v).

Office building construction in Newcastle revived in the 1950s as pioneering Modern Movement-inspired towers sprang up in the city centre - Bates Smart & McCutcheon’s MLC Building in, boasting a sleek glass and metal curtain wall, local architects Mayo & Wark’s Royal Exchange Assurance Building, Rudder Littlemore & Rudder’s equally glassy Latec House, and Sydney architect Marcus Woodforde’s National Mutual Building. Local architects Rodd & Hay’s sleek Rural Bank was enriched by Virgil Lo Shiavo’s long mural in the banking chamber. The buildings have since been modified. In Wollongong two large adjoining office blocks for insurance companies were completed in Keira Street in 1956. The MLC building was designed by Bates Smart & McCutcheon and the AMP Building was designed by Stephenson & Turner.
Insurance companies weren’t alone. Banks found the corporate side of the Modern Movement to their taste. Between 1945 and 1956 the Commonwealth Bank opened 175 branches and built 40 in 1955-56. The Bank of NSW announced an immense building program in the first half of 1955, budgeting £7,000,000 over five years for building works in 269 locations across Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and Fiji. The establishment of the Reserve Bank in 1959 contributed to NSW’s business prestige. It celebrated with a gleaming new building in Martin Place that trod a fine line between the Modern Movement and corporate conservatism – a rationally designed tall building with sculpture by Margel Hinder clad extensively with white marble.

Some banks stood out from their conservative brothers. ANZ in particular embraced the Modern Movement. Joseland & Gilling designed numerous branches throughout suburban Sydney and country districts. Their 1950s Gordon and Kurrajong, branches suggest they were pleasant single storey buildings of brick and stone with extensive glazing, off-centre entries and easy-to read lettering. Melbourne architects Buchan Laird & Buchan also designed ANZ branches in NSW. For instance, their refined minimal Zetland and Kings Cross branches were unimpeded volumes with expansive areas of glass exposing interiors to public view and diagrammatic open planning with open customer service areas.
Banks were just one facet of main streets. During the 1950s and 1960s opportunities for shopping proliferated as consumers’ spending power grew and there was more to buy. The local shopping strip was infiltrated by Modern Movement concepts. For instance, Curtin & Cameron’s block of shops at Kogarah featured new concrete systems for floors, roofs, and cantilevered awnings to achieve rational, speedy and low-cost construction. Human-scaled developments such as Ancher Mortlock & Murray’s complex at Pymble placed two rows of shops on either side of a pedestrian court to create a car-free environment while Edwards Madigan & Torzillo’s shopping centre at Lane Cove was designed with underground parking and a street-level pedestrian court. E Beck’s ambitious Totem Centre at Balgowlah included shops, a community centre and home units.

On a larger scale, architect F J Zipfinger’s regional shopping centre at Seven Hills provided parking for 1,200 cars and a residential hotel.

Department stores, spread to suburban areas and became an integral part of a new phenomenon, the regional shopping centre. The first in Australia was at Chermside in Brisbane (1957), which contained a department store, supermarket, shops and parking for about 700 cars. It was designed by Ken Cowan, who was not an architect but had visited similar centres in America. The first in NSW was A H Dwyer and Whitehead & Payne’s Top Ryde Regional Shopping Centre (since demolished), opening 6 months after Chermside. It had 40 shops, a department store, chain store, supermarket and a restaurant arranged around open walkways leading to a central mall. The complex was unified by consistent shopfronts and flat-roofed verandahs, and embellished by Gordon Andrews’ sculpture and mural. It was followed by large centres such as Alexander Kann, Finch & Partners’ refined Warringah Mall and Hely, Bell & Horne’s bold Bankstown Square. Retail giant Westfield emerged in 1959 when Westfield Place at Bankstown opened with two department stores, a supermarket and 12 shops. These trends were repeated in regional centres across NSW.
Major regional centres from the 1960s: Kann Finch & Partners’ 1961 Warringah Mall at Brookvale (left) and Melbourne architects Tomkins Shaw and Evans’ Miranda Fair, circa 1965. These architects undertook a great deal of work for retail giant Myers (Warringah Mall – SLNSW, Don McPhedran photograph, Australian Photographic Agency – 14351; Miranda Fair – NLA nla.pic-an23150337-v).

Mass market Modern Movement details in commercial architecture – mild Googie geometries enliven a commercial building on Pacific Highway, Crows Nest (left) and a decorative grille doing double duty as a sun screen in Bong Bong Street, Bowral (Roy Lumby photographs).