

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



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CONSERVATION OF MODERN MOVEMENT BUILDINGS

Roy Lumby

Over the years a vast body of knowledge has developed for the upkeep and conservation of traditionally constructed buildings. Sadly this not always the case for Modern Movement architecture.

There was a wealth of new materials and building techniques coming onto the market during the 1950s and 1960s. Overseas products were imported or made locally under licence. They were designed for unskilled, quick installation and minimal maintenance. A wealth of plastics ranged from internal applications such as vinyl and laminates to fibreglass based products, concrete underlays and polystyrene insulation. Aluminium was promoted for its ability to resist corrosion while baked enamel finishes on metal roof decks protected and enhanced appearance. There was increasing reliance on caulking and sealants, which were low cost and required no specialised skills for installation. Glass manufacturers improved technology with products that reduced transmission of solar heat and reduced glare.

The problem is that not all had been proven before they came on the market, many didn't have a long lifespan and many are now unobtainable. Other problems relate to poor workmanship and use of materials without knowledge of best-practice methods. As well, many buildings have been poorly maintained.

Conservation of Modern Movement buildings provides greater challenges than for earlier buildings. Their conservation is important because of their historical, social and aesthetic place in the heritage of NSW but has meant at times a high degree of technical specialisation as solutions are found to the problems sketched above. There is a need for balance between buildings continuing to function appropriately while still respecting their original design intent. This can be as simple as repairing damaged building fabric or as difficult as finding ways to effectively replace things that are no longer available or enhancing the technical performance of buildings. They were built at a time when energy was cheap, but this is offset by the benefits of retaining and reusing them. Perhaps the real challenge is to adapt or modify buildings and places to suit new requirements while preserving enough of them so that their original qualities can be enjoyed and understood by all.

CONCLUSIONS

Modern Movement architecture infiltrated all aspects of life during the 1950s and 1960s, from the home though to the work place and religious life, while out shopping, relaxing and socialising or out on the open road. It symbolised several things – good government, corporate prestige, community responsibility, faith in a better life in the future and NSW's emerging place in the world. It was also adapted to house burgeoning public institutions such as universities and new building types such as motels.

Architects thought long and hard about what was appropriate for local conditions. Although there was an enthusiastic embrace of new technology and aesthetics from overseas in the post-war period, consolidating pre-war trends, a large number of architects also thought critically about their work, so aspects of the Modern Movement were tempered by practical and aesthetic responses to climate and site. In the public sector the Government Architect's Branch provided high quality Modern Movement architecture for public institutions across the state. Modern Movement architecture is also evidence of the way that European migrants contributed to the state, enriching and enlarging our cultural heritage – many brought first-hand experience with them.

Structural systems were exploited to provide large clear spans and exciting building forms often resulted from this. Although glass may seem the most characteristic material of the Modern Movement, exemplified by the curtain wall and light open houses, in many ways it was concrete that most of all excited designers from the 1950s through to the 1970s. However, many new materials and techniques appeared. Not all of them have stood the test of time well.

Modern Movement architects quickly responded to local climatic conditions, introducing passive solar control and designing to take advantage of orientation and prevailing winds. Houses were a direct response to changing lifestyles, integrating buildings with their sites and allowing people the opportunity of comfortable and informal lifestyles. The Sydney School strand of the Modern Movement led the way with buildings that respected the natural realm.

The modern movement in landscape in New South Wales was slow to develop. Its evolution to converge with ecologically based design was so successful that almost 40 years later in 2013 it is taken for granted. These landscapes appear to have always been there. At times the underpinning philosophy is either not understood or read on shallow terms as more recent trends for axial planning and formalism in design have come to the fore.

In point of fact, as far as architecture is concerned, the Modern Movement never really went away. Its influence continued through the 1980s and 1990s and is still evident today.

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