

# Architect Victoria

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## Editorial

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## Slice

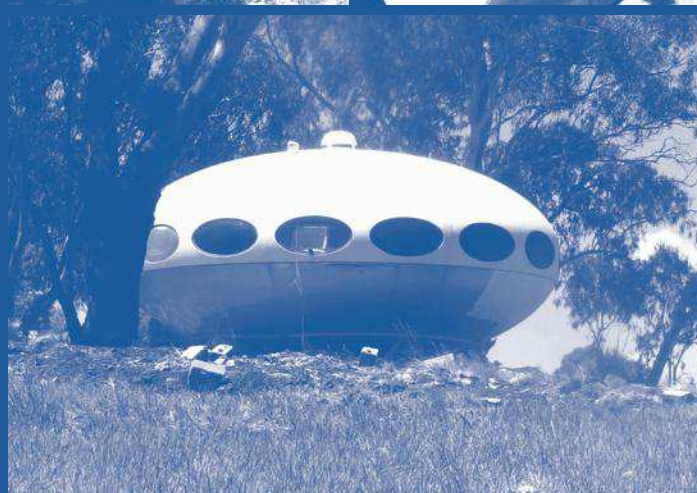
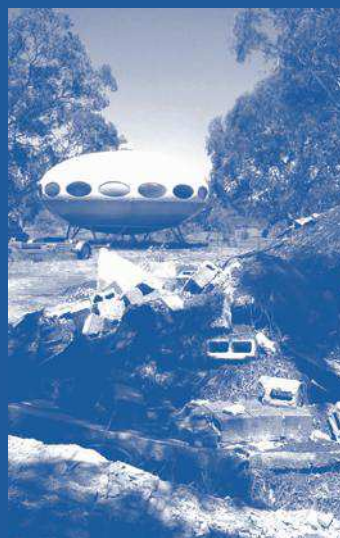
Anthony Parker

## Messages

Office of the Victorian Government Architect – Jill Garner

Committee for Melbourne – Andrew MacLeod

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# Warrnambool Motors Showroom

Simon Reeves

## 22 CASE STUDY

It was just another day at the office for staff at the Warrnambool City Council in December 2007 when the Building Surveyor's department received an application for Consent of Demolition under Section 29A of the *Building Act*. The site under consideration was any developer's dream: a generous allotment on the elevated stretch of the Princes Highway, flanked by two shiny service stations and a supermarket carpark, in a Business 1 zone devoid of any troublesome overlays. Sure, there were existing buildings on the block—an isolated stone cottage and an unremarkable inter-war bungalow, largely concealed from the street by a glass-fronted motor showroom. Nevertheless, as a matter of course, the demolition application was referred to council's heritage advisor, Timothy Hubbard of Heritage Matters Pty Ltd. His preliminary research soon established that the old bungalow was formerly occupied by the family of Tom Lucas, a businessman who juggled numerous local ventures including the Warrnambool Bus Lines and Warrnambool Motors. The latter was based downtown, at 220 Timor Street, from the '20s to the '60s, when Lucas elected to build a fancy new showroom on his elevated block where the Princes Highway rises up on the outskirts of town—a fittingly top-end location for Lucas to display his range of top-end automobiles (Fiat, Lancia, BMC). In 1964, a suitable building was designed by architect Bruce Auty, late of the prolific local partnership of Walter & Auty.



*Warrnambool Motors Showroom 'Before' in 2007*  
Photographer Timothy Hubbard  
(Heritage Matters Pty Ltd)



*Warrnambool Motors Showroom 'After' in 2010*  
Photographer Timothy Hubbard  
(Heritage Matters Pty Ltd)

While the average heritage consultant's fancy might have been drawn to the compromised stone cottage or the ramshackle bungalow, Hubbard instead eyed Bruce Auty's post-war motor showroom with interest. A deceptively simple structure, it comprised three full-height glazed walls with a squat concrete block tower to the rear, below a skillion roof that sloped up towards the street, forming a broad projecting eave supported on three steel-beam struts that angled inward to the base of the building. Former convenor of the 2005 ICOMOS conference *Corrugations: the Romance and Reality of Historic Roads*, Dr Hubbard knew vintage roadside architecture when he saw it. He promptly conferred with some like-minded colleagues: heritage architect David Wixted and his historian wife Michele Summerton (pop culturalists both, perhaps even Australia's answer to Jane and Michael Stern) and the present writer, an indefatigable archaeologist of the cultural and architectural detritus of the post-war era. This panel of experts duly conceded that the Warrnambool Motors showroom was a fine example of high-tech low-camp American-style roadside architecture—better known by the many sub-onomatopoeic labels bestowed upon it by a coterie of admirers/chroniclers in the USA: Googie, Populuxe, Doo-wop, Borax, Jetsonian; "Boomerang Modern, Palette Curvilinear, Flash Gordon Ming-Alert Spiral and McDonald's Hamburger Parabola" (Tom Wolfe).

Thereby armed, Dr Hubbard hurried to compile an urgent heritage assessment to counter the Section 29A application. Dipping into the ever-expanding bibliography of pertinent American publications—specifically the Gospels according to Chester Liebs (*Main Street to Miracle Mile: American Roadside Architecture*, 1985) and Alan Hess (*Googie: Fifties Coffee Shop Architecture*, 1986)—provided a clear international context. In this way, for example, those distinctive angled struts could be conclusively identified as an authentic Googie *leitmotif* known as the Structural Bent. Comparative analysis closer to home, however, proved troublesome—until this point, Australian manifestations of roadside architecture had seldom been acknowledged by heritage experts; much less recorded or catalogued in a systematic fashion. With scant time for primary research and less for fieldwork, Dr Hubbard turned to the State Library of Victoria's online photographic archive—duly unearthing an image of a not dissimilar commercial premises with skillion roof sloping up to a full-glazed facade, and broad eaves on angled struts. However, further investigation of this fine comparator was stymied by scholarly dispute, as sources differed regarding its location and architectural attribution. Identified by the State Library of Victoria staff as a hardware showroom at the BALM Paint factory at Clayton (Hassell & McConnell, 1957) and by Harriet Edquist (45 Storeys, p 16) as a car showroom at Brooklyn (Robert Rosh, 1957), its address—and thence its current status—could not be confirmed. Meanwhile, the present writer plundered his own photographic archive to reveal existing and fully verifiable comparative examples: the former Austin Motors showroom on the Nepean Highway at Cheltenham, with an octagonal turret-like motif, and another on Warrigal Road, Ashburton—since razed—with the quintessentially Googie folded-plate roof. The prize pig, however, proved to be the former Anderson's Carpet showroom at 1360 Toorak Road, Burwood: designed by architect



John Ahern in 1960, this clearly foreshadowed the Warrnambool Motors building with its glazed facade, skillion roof and broad upward-raked eaves on angled struts.



*Anderson's Carpet Showroom, Burwood  
Photographer Simon Reeves*

The ultimate product of this mad dash of collaborative research and assessment was a five-page report that Dr Hubbard submitted to the Warrnambool City Council on 19 December 2007. Historical and architectural significance was ascribed to the showroom, respectively for its ability “to demonstrate the importance and emerging dominance of the motor car after the Second World War”, and “for its futuristic form, which uses a dramatic structure to sell cars and as the work of the important local architect, Bruce Auty”. Dr Hubbard concluded that “based on our research, a peer review by appropriate colleagues who are expert in the field and discussions with Heritage Victoria, we strongly recommend that support for demolition be withheld under Section 29A of the Building Act and that the Minister for Planning be asked to implement an urgent amendment to the Warrnambool Planning Scheme to identify this building (to the extent of the 1964 structure and the whole of the title) in the Heritage Overlay Schedule”.

To their credit, planners at Warrnambool City Council were wholly supportive of Dr Hubbard's findings—something he attributes to a mutual confidence that has built up over several years of dispensing heritage advice and undertaking local studies. However, Council was reluctant to approach the Minister for Planning to grant

an interim heritage control and, as Dr Hubbard recalls, “all we could do was rely on goodwill”. In what has been a bittersweet outcome, the site has since been partially cleared. The stone cottage and inter-war bungalow—identified by Dr Hubbard as contributory elements for historic associations with the family that built the showroom—has gone, and the showroom itself partially demolished by the removal of the concrete block tower to the rear. However, the glass-walled box with its dramatic angled struts yet remains—not only as evidence of post-war commercialism in Warrnambool and/or the impact of Googie in Australia, but also of a notable (if minor) heritage battle that saw consultants wading through uncharted waters.

Happily, the foregoing exercise has proven more of an Amalthea's Horn than a Pandora's Box. Several of the local manifestations of Googie discussed during the rapid course of the assessment—as well as the Warrnambool Motors showroom itself—subsequently found their way into the lavish two-volume *Survey of Post-War Built Heritage in Victoria*, which David Wixted's office, Heritage Alliance, completed for Heritage Victoria in 2008. That same year, Dr Hubbard furthered his own awareness of the idiom with a genuine road trip along Route 66, during which he sighted a number of suspiciously familiar forms including a concrete block tower element—at the Copper Cart Diner in Seligman, Arizona—virtually identical to that seen in a humble motor showroom in faraway Warrnambool.



*Copper Cart Diner, Seligman, Arizona  
Photographer Timothy Hubbard  
(Heritage Matters Pty Ltd)*

## Remembering Walter & Auty

The names of W J T Walter and Bruce Auty, architects, would elicit shrugged shoulders from most Melbourne-based heritage consultants; yet until the former's retirement and the latter's tragic drowning in a boating accident, these two men represented—individually and in partnership—the most successful and known modern architects in the Western District. Writing in 2008, a local journalist went as far to note that Walter “today holds the title of being Warrnambool's most important 20th-century architect.”

A true pioneer of the area, William John Taggart Walter (1909–1987) was born in Penhurst, near Hamilton; his family relocated to Warrnambool before World War I. “Tag” Walter, as he preferred, trained as a plumber and builder under his father (a master builder, property developer and sewerage contractor) before opening his own architectural office in 1934. By decade's end, he had completed many significant local commissions: the Nurses' Home at the Base Hospital, the new Tattersall's Hotel, a parking garage, blocks of flats and his own Arts & Crafts bungalow residence at 49 Henna Street. In 1951, he was joined by Melbourne youngster Bruce Auty (1928–1973), a recent MU graduate and ARBV registree (his application endorsed, no less, by his former design tutor, the great D D Alexandra). Fellow baccalaureate Kevin Borland was also a close friend, making the occasional trek to Walter & Auty's Warrnambool office during the 1960s and, after the latter's sad death, rushing out west to help wind up the business.

At the height of Walter & Auty's prestige, the firm was responsible for innumerable “American-style suburban dream homes”—large brick veneer residences in a smart Featurist style: low pitched roofs, angled fascias, slab-like chimneys, slate feature walls and decorative grilles. Fine examples remain today along the west end of Verdon Street, with the standout—Walter's own—still catching eyes at Henna and Koroit. Along with firm's extensive output of slick roadside architecture—American-style car showrooms, eateries (Kermond's Burger Bar; Mack's Snacks) and motels (the Mid-City; the Western), these remain far more evocative of the '50s world of Didi Conn than D D Alexandra.

**Simon Reeves**