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Editorial

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Contributors

Gard'ner, Sagazio, McMahon, Lewis, Lovell, Jordan, Reeves, Wixted

Slice

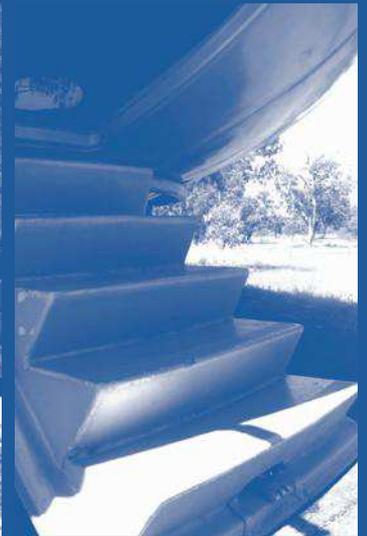
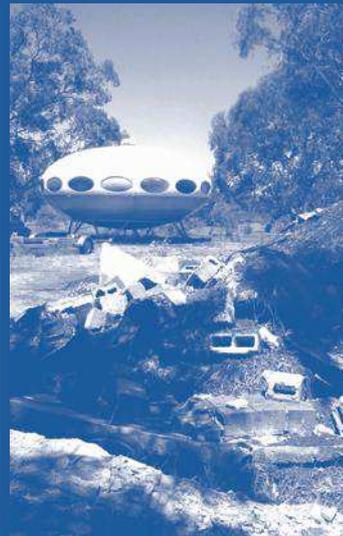
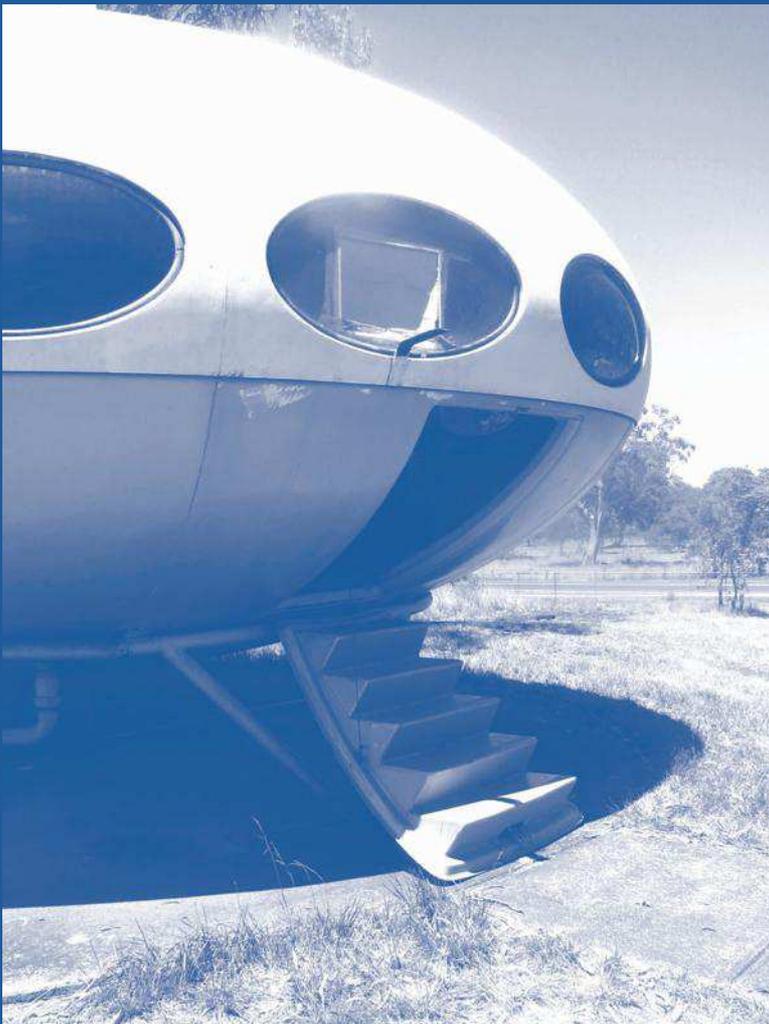
Anthony Parker

Messages

Office of the Victorian Government Architect – Jill Garner

Committee for Melbourne – Andrew MacLeod

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Tomorrow's Heritage...Today!

Simon Reeves

'I was born in the '50s, was a child in the '60s, a teenager in the '70s, married in the '80s, divorced in the '90s. The second half of the 20th century is my whole life. And you know, when I go back none of the places from that part of my life exist anymore. My parents' house was bulldozed and replaced with town houses twenty years ago. The schools I went to have both been demolished. Even the service stations where I worked part-time are gone. It's as if my life is being erased in my wake.'
Dr John Schofield, English Heritage, 2004.

Five years ago, to the quarter, your guest-editor wrote here of "Heritage Overlooked", bemoaning the nonacknowledgement of places thought to fall outside the canon of mainstream heritage significance. The biggest bugbear concerned places from the post-Second World War era: from 1945 to—let's not be stingy—the end of the twentieth century. After expressing irritation at the ambivalence post-war places have long been afforded—both within and beyond professional heritage circles—the present writer paid tribute to (then) recent attempts to raise profiles and awareness: new typological studies and the boom of monographs/exhibitions devoted to cherished local modernists. Five years thence, not only has there been little increase in the number of post-war places on local heritage schedules but also cases of hesitation and hostility to the very idea. To humbly illustrate: the 2005 article included 14 marginal images of post-war places deemed by the author to possess non-marginal cultural significance, of which at least half have since been lost. The question that hovers: at whose (clay) feet should we lay the blame for haughty dismissal of our recent past, and its under-representation on heritage lists?

Of course, it is fashionable to blame an uneducated unwashed for the fallacy that anything built after 1945 is not worth preserving—a mindset so entrenched that even a patient discourse on the sine-curve of aesthetic taste (*viz* Victorian buildings loathed in the 1930s; Art Deco unpopular in the 1970s) will not dislodge it. Even those in sympathy to

the heritage movement may fail to transcend the fact that the site of an "ugly" modernist structure was, within living memory, once occupied by a treasured pre-war edifice. Certainly when BHP House (Yuncken Freeman, 1971) was added to the *Victorian Heritage Register* (VHR) in 1998, one tabloid journalist noted that, "had heritage awareness been around when BHP House was built, it would not have been, at least not there"—a reference to the famed Menzies Hotel, fondly recalled by visitors from Twain to Trollope. There is no question of the hotel's sublime historical resonance, and the sad story of its decline and fall deserved the retelling it received in David Latta's weepy architectural necrology, *Lost Glories* (1986). Yet this is hardly fodder to diminish the importance of the slick modern tower that replaced it. When its design architect, the late Barry Patten, was pressed for comment by the same journalist, he riposted with understandable annoyance: "what do you want me to say—that the Menzies shouldn't have been knocked down and Melbourne would have been better if they had kept it?"ⁱ

Another half-truth, embraced less by the public than by agencies/authorities, is that sufficient time must elapse before a place becomes significant—a cooling-off period (or perhaps a warming-up?) Your writer recalls, some years ago, flagging the merit of some modern high-rise flats to a council planner who retorted, with apparent conviction, that a building must be at least *fifty* years old to qualify as "heritage". Alas, her allusion—to the 50 Year Rule used by the *US National Register of Historic Places*—was an illusion; the NRHP adopted this rule way back in 1948 and abandoned it after new heritage legislation was passed in 1966.ⁱⁱ It may surprise that English Heritage, once considered the most conservative of conservators, never had a 50 Year Rule at all; since 1987, legislation allows buildings to be listed if they are at least thirty years old, with a proviso for more recent buildings (as young as ten years) that are both under threat and of outstanding merit.ⁱⁱⁱ Closer to home, our National Trust rescinded its own

long-held 40 Year Rule as far back as 1980. At the end of that decade, the demolition of the 27-storey CRA House in Collins Street (Bernard Evans & Associates, 1965)—our first modern CBD skyscraper—prompted the creation of the Trust's Twentieth Century Committee, which (as detailed elsewhere by its senior historian Dr Celestina Sagazio) has since embarked on a intensive campaign to classify post-war places. It may raise eyebrows even higher that Heritage Victoria has never imposed *any* restriction on the minimum age of places included on the VHR. At the time of press, Heritage Victoria has a dozen registered places erected after 1970, with the youngest dating from as recently as 1984.

It might be argued that temporal criteria of this sort reflects a quaint and outmoded approach to heritage assessment. But as a former National Trust administrator put it: "it's possible to identify from the day a building goes up that it's significant, and in my view it ought to be classified immediately if it warrants it."^{iv} Heritage Victoria endorsed this view when they commissioned their recent statewide *Survey of Post-War Built Heritage* and bravely set the year 2000 as the cut-off. Recent-ish places identified therein included 101 Collins Street (Denton Corker Marshall, 1986–90) which, in a fitting *denouement*, was the very project that prompted the razing of Bernard Evans' CRA House, and, in turn, the National Trust's Twentieth Century Committee. While barely two decades old, few observers (at least within the profession) would now question its cultural significance as a local flagship of corporate Po-Mo, heightened (arguably?) by the input of New York's Johnson Burgee in what proved to be a unique antipodean foray. Elsewhere in this issue, veteran heritage consultant Nigel Lewis recalls assessing 1960s building as early as 1976; why not then, in 2010, should we not look as unblushingly to the 1990s?

While championship of post-war places by the National Trust warrants ovation, one must

be gently reminded that it cannot provide statutory protection to individual specimens. An inventory of modernist buildings assessed and classified by the Trust, only to be destroyed regardless, is hardly rib-tickling: the Newlands Estate Shopping Centre in Preston (Housing Commission of Victoria, 1949), Shell House at Bourke and William (Buchan, Laird & Buchan with Skidmore Owings & Merrill, 1958) and Victoria's first regional motel, the Mitchell Valley Motel at Bairnsdale (John Mockridge, 1957) to name but a few. One feels the same tristesse perusing the *Twentieth Century Building Register*, compiled by Graeme Butler in 1983 for RAlA (Victoria) as part of the institute's ambitious nationwide project—surely the first serious attempt to appraise the architectural heritage of our recent past. But the shameful legacy is that few post-war places on Butler's list ever found their way into local heritage studies—while some that did never progressed thence to the overlay schedule. Three subsequent decades of demolition and alteration have taken their toll: wince-inducing casualties include Feltex House on Nicholson Street (Guilford Bell, 1960), the Rotex Cinema in Montmorency (Clarke, Hopkins & Clarke, 1976), top-drawer modernist houses such as *Blue Peter* (Rae Featherston, 1956) and *Pelican* (Grounds, Romberg & Boyd, 1959) at Mount Eliza, and Kenneth McDonald's own butterfly-roofed dwelling at North Balwyn (1952). Sufficient fodder, really, for David Latta (or his modernist counterpart) to publish a second volume of *Lost Glories*. Other fine buildings on Butler's list—the British Tobacco Factory at East Bentleigh (Godfrey Spowers etc, 1956), the Mobil Centre at Southgate (Bates, Smart & McCutcheon, 1960) and Royal Mail House on Bourke Street (Graeme Lumsden, 1963)—may yet remain standing, albeit rendered unrecognisable (often literally) by refurbishment.

Clearly, to merely identify, document or assess a post-war building as a heritage place is not enough to guarantee its survival. Stories abound of local authorities and other stakeholders—the

custodians of built fabric in the surest position to protect it—that downplay or dismiss advice from a heritage consultant they themselves have employed. By now, we all know the legend of the three-volume Conservation Management Plan (CMP) prepared for the National Gallery of Victoria in 1995 by Allom Lovell & Associates and Dr Philip Goad, which stressed the importance of retaining Sir Roy's vision. Hardly what the gallery director wanted to hear, the CMP was suppressed and another prepared by a rival consultant. One has heard many similar tales. An attempt to explain the outstanding historical and aesthetic merit of a local tenpin bowling alley—the oldest, best and most intact survivor of its type in Victoria—met with an icy response from a council planner, who advised the consultant to photograph it before it was demolished; it was. The Kodak factory in Coburg (H A & F L Norris, 1957–60) met a sticky end after the responsible authority allowed demolition in the face of expert advice to the contrary—a sad tale retold in this issue by consultant David Wixted. The eye-catching Student Union at Hawthorn's Swinburne Institute (Godfrey Spowers etc, 1959) was similarly razed after its custodians commissioned a heritage report that carefully explained its cultural significance. Granted, more satisfactory outcomes do happen—witness the respective sagas of the Oakleigh Motel (James Miller/Techdraft, 1956) and the Maribyrnong Migrant Hostel (Montgomery, King & Trengove, 1967) related elsewhere. Although now both on the VHR, this tick of approval came in each case after prolonged stints in planning purgatory; the subject of council indecision and an *ouroboros* of seemingly contradictory heritage assessments.

A memorable instance of a local authority collapsing beneath the weight of community opposition is imbued in the tale of the *Inter-War & Post-War Heritage Study* (2007–08). Even before things ran awry, this was one historic project—the first time since 1992 that a Victorian municipality had sought a dedicated survey of its own twentieth century heritage.



The release of the Stage Two report, however, brought about a backlash from property owners (and, in one wry case, from the owner's friends, relatives, neighbours and children) whose written objections flooded the planning department. The most oft-expressed sentiment was sheer incredulity that their own home could ever be "heritage"—never mind these disputed dwellings included stand-out works by the ilk of Bell, Borland, Chancellor, Clerehan, Godsell and McIntyre. Despite this outcry, council instructed its consultants to proceed with Stage Three, to assess further places. As Stage Two had covered the pin-up buildings, the next phase permitted consideration of others whose rare charms may not have been so obvious. Although some truly astounding discoveries emerged, they were doomed never to receive statutory protection—or even the privilege of public release. Council informed its consultant that the project would be abandoned due to the ferocity of ratepayer opposition; no further work was to be carried out. The Stage Three report—"from a mother's womb untimely ripp'd"—remains unpublished today, like the *Scrolls of St Issa* or Ambassador Zahle's dossier (or even the NGV CMP), tantalisingly elusive and only seen by an exalted few.

But what of heritage consultants themselves? Some, shackled by subjectivity, still cannot bring themselves to acknowledge the significance of post-war places. Your guest-editor once suggested to a certain practitioner that an abandoned drive-in cinema in regional Victoria—replete with a rare timber-framed projection screen—deserved a citation in the local heritage study, only to be told: "I don't think anyone would be interested in THAT". Yet the Australian Cinema Historical Society is interested; projectionist-turned-archaeologist David Kilderry (whose fine on-line inventory of local drive-in cinemas has garnered more than 100,000 hits) is interested; the National Trust is interested—classifying five examples since 2007; Heritage Victoria is interested—commissioning a statewide typological study, and, as we speak,



mooting the addition of the two finest remaining examples (Coburg and Dromana) on the VHR. Curiously, the same consultant who pooh-poohed that humble country drive-in (since, incidentally, destroyed) was equally dismissive of the Delbridge House in Eaglemont, the Nylex silos in Richmond and the Chef stove factory in Brunswick—three fine post-war places all since added to the VHR.

Even those heritage consultants who cheerfully concede the charms of the post-war era may yet be stymied by objective assessment of individual places. While the works of Boyd (no forename required) and his monographed pantheon will always command attention, most consultants seem to lack the bravado to defend the work of lesser-known post-war architects (Tad Karasinski, Tony Hayden, Geoff Danne, Herbert Tisher, Burrowes & McKeown—this list goes on and on and on) who sometimes created remarkable buildings worth preserving. Consultants might nervously eschew the work of architects not merely living but still in practice; yet in doing so, we will inevitably lose the meritorious juvenilia of *les enfants terrible* of the 1970s—they know who they are—who remain amongst our most lauded practitioners today.

In the same vein, a paucity of appropriate resources and references renders comparative analysis of new building types (eg motels, project housing, stadia, bowling alleys, fast food restaurants) vexing. Admirably, Heritage Victoria has sponsored a steady stream of typological studies of great value to scholars of the recent past—not just drive-ins but municipal swimming pools, modern churches, post-war migrant sites—but many more are needed. The department's commitment to the issue is also vested in the aforementioned *Survey of Post-War Built Heritage in Victoria*, a lavish catalogue of over 500 places “of potential state significance” across the state. Cleansing through this Augean stable of serving suggestions, however, will take time and resources. The ball remains firmly in the court

of heritage consultants (and councils) to digest this data with a view to assessing places and making their own calls. Of 2,200+ places now on the VHR, less than 50 (barely 2%) were built after 1945. Much work remains to be done.

Ultimately, there are no longer any excuses why the built fabric of 1945–2000 should not be warmly embraced as heritage places, without shame or guile, by consultants, agencies, local authorities, planners and the general public alike. We've had ten years to warm to the fact that the twentieth century is not just a closed set, but something that happened quite some time ago. The time to identify, research, assess, evaluate, investigate, document and finally protect these places is NOW.

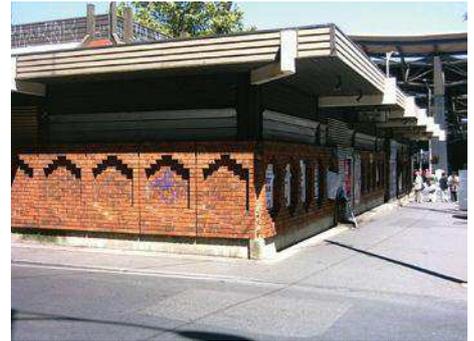
Simon Reeves
Built Heritage Pty Ltd

Biography

Simon Reeves, B Arch (Hons) The University of Melbourne has more than ten years experience as an architectural historian and heritage consultant. Last year, he formed his own consultancy, Built Heritage Pty Ltd, to specialise in the assessment and documentation of heritage places from the twentieth century, with an emphasis on the post-Second World War period.

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- ⁱ Bob Hart, 'Heritage, it's all in the minding', Herald Sun, 31 August 1998.
- ⁱⁱ John Sprinkle, 'Of Exceptional Importance: The Origins of the 'Fifty Year Rule' in Historic Preservation', Public Historian, XXIX, 2 (Spring 2007), p 81–103.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Elain Harwood, 'Praising or Razing?' in Sheridan Burke (ed.), Fibro House: Opera House. Conserving Mid-Twentieth Century Heritage, p 8.
- ^{iv} Jennifer McAsey, 'Moving to save city's Twentieth Century Heritage', The Age, 3 July 1989, p 17.



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