

ROY PRENTICE: CENTENARY ARCHITECT



Union Bank of Australia, 306 Little Collins Street, by A & K Henderson (1937)
Photograph by Simon Reeves, 2006.

One bright moment of Melbourne's Depression was the celebration of the city's centenary in 1934. Of the countless changes that this wrought on the built environment, one of the most memorable – a literally bright moment of which no trace now remains – was the elaborate street lighting. City streets were lined with 700 lamps with inverted coloured reflectors that, as the *Argus* noted, were "mathematically and graphically calculated to throw a flood of illumination over the entire street surface", while, at

Princes Bridge, sixteen plastered pylons were "illuminated from within to give the effect of soft radiance". Sponsored by the State Electricity Commission, this lighting represented the work of young architect R R Prentice. One wonders if, as the young designer prepared the drawings, it ever crossed his mind that he would, seven decades later, celebrate a centenary of his own.

Roy Prentice in the 1960s,
courtesy Roy and Andrew Prentice

Tuesday, 20 June 2006, marked the one hundredth birthday of Roy Riggall Prentice, perhaps Australia's oldest surviving architect and certainly one of our last links with those who entered the profession in the early 1920s. While best known as Chief Architect of the Housing Commission of Victoria from 1958 until his retirement in 1972 – during which time his designs for high-rise apartments brought him fame and notoriety in roughly equal measures – this has overshadowed his diverse and remarkable architectural career in the pre-War period.

First son of Reverend W T Prentice and Florence Ada Riggall, Roy was born in Heyfield, New South Wales, where his father was Anglican vicar. The latter was transferred thence to other parishes in that state before returning to Melbourne in 1915, where he founded the new parish of All Saints', Kooyong. He commissioned noted ecclesiastical architects North & Williams to design a new church on the Glenferrie Road site, which opened in September 1916. Nine decades later, his son Roy can still recall the building under construction – his earliest architectural memory, and one that would steer the direction of his pre-War career. Artistic talent had already emerged by that time. One of the first students at the new Scotch College campus in Hawthorn, Roy recalls his drawing skills being praised by the Master when he was only ten years old. Such flair ran in the family – his maternal aunt Louise Riggall (1868-1918) being an artist of some international repute.



One of Roy's first architectural achievements was a garage at his parents' holiday house in Tecoma, which he and his brother Sid erected in 1918. Around the same time, Roy transferred to Melbourne Grammar, obtaining an Intermediate Certificate in 1920. His interest in an architectural career had burgeoned, and he became articled to Louis Williams, designer of All Saints', and commenced the Diploma of Architecture at the University of Melbourne. Completing his articles in 1925 and his course a year later, Roy stayed on with Williams as a senior draftsman in charge of twelve men, and was one of the last employees to leave when the office finally closed down due to the Depression.

By that time, Roy had already begun the evening course at the University's Architectural Atelier, where he recalls his classmates included such up-and-coming Modernists as Ewen Laird (later of Buchan, Laird & Buchan), Alan Fildes (later of Seabrook & Fildes) and Tom Payne (later a prolific designer of Catholic churches, to rival Louis Williams). Roy fondly recalls the Atelier's director, noted architect Leighton Irwin, as 'a fine teacher' who, after Roy received his second Diploma in 1931, offered him a permanent position in his own office. But he declined, just as he would decline a similar offer from Stephenson & Turner, Louis Williams' upstairs neighbours. Roy was planning to start out on his own, but first set his sights on undertaking the University's new Bachelor of Architecture degree, which he completed in 1933 – only the second person to do so.

Roy became an Associate of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects in May 1933 and opened his own office in the then newly-renovated Charter House at 4 Bank Place, taking rooms on the fourth floor alongside the well-established firm of A & K Henderson. On the floor below, two other new offices were also starting out – Philip Hudson (only recently split from partner James Wardrop) and three former members of Henderson's staff, who styled themselves as Yuncken, Freeman & Freeman. Roy remembers his first private commission as the remodelling of a house in Gerard Street, Caulfield – since demolished – for Reverend Albert Devenish (1854-1947), an associate of his father's. Anglican connections are revealed in his subsequent output, such as additions to the All Saints' parish hall and the completion of St Jude's in Carlton – a new porch in the Gothic Revival style. He also designed a baptistery for a church at Woodend – later built without his supervision – and a tower for another at Bentleigh that remained unrealised. Roy further recalls working 'in my spare time' for other architects, including not only his early mentor Leighton Irwin, but also Bates, Smart & McCutcheon and Sydney Smith, Ogg & Serpell. He also recalls being approached to form a partnership by architect William Balcombe Griffiths (1906-91). Roy declined yet again, as he had plans – like many architects of that generation – to seek employ in London. Griffiths instead joined Roy's downstairs neighbours, becoming the fourth name in the firm thereafter known as Yuncken, Freeman Brothers & Griffiths.

Roy left for London in early 1936, and through the Royal Institute of British Architects, gained a position in the office of leading Modernist Robert Atkinson (1883-1952). The fact that Atkinson once designed a house in London for a Miss Prentice (1933) suggests a prior familial connection – yet Roy maintains that this was just a coincidence. Rather, Atkinson's office – then comprising two partners and about a dozen assistants – had a fine reputation for employing visiting Australians. Roy recalls two compatriots during his tenure: George Hatherley Alsop (1903-1957) – of Plottel, Bunnet & Alsop – and a Sydney woman, Winsome Hall (1905-1997), then Atkinson's Senior Assistant.

The only project that Roy can specifically recall working on in Atkinson's office was a two storey showroom for the Gaslight & Coke Company at 178-180 Edgware Road. This slick Deco building – completed after he left the office and since demolished – had a travertine facade enlivened by marble and Vitrolite and, at the upper level, an aluminium-faced clock and fountain with neon tubing to evoke jets of water. Roy remembers working on other projects for the same client – presumably its unbuilt head office in Westminster (1936) and the celebrated *Kensal House* in North Kensington (1936-37), an apartment block for gas company workers designed in conjunction with Maxwell Fry and others. Huge apartment blocks were the mainstay of Atkinson's office at that time – after designing his first in 1934 – and Roy may have also worked on such examples as the White House (1935-36) and Oslo Court (1936-37),



Left: Regency Lodge, Swiss Cottage, London, by Robert Atkinson (1935-37),
Right: Kensal House, North Kensington, London, by Robert Atkinson (1936-37), photographs by Simon Reeves, 2005.



Roy Prentice at the Melbourne University Architectural Atelier, 1931, from the Bulletin of the MUAA, 1931 (author's collection)

both in Regent's Park, and Regency Lodge in Swiss Cottage (1935-37).

After six months with Atkinson, Roy took a position in the smaller office of Fisher & Trubshaw, who, he recalls, were mostly engaged in 'county' work for the idle rich. Roy remembers meeting many of these moneyed clients, and also working on a public housing estate – prescient of his later career with the Housing Commission. Such was Roy's standing with this small firm that when the two partners went on a skiing holiday to Austria, they left him in charge of the entire office.

Returning to Melbourne in early 1937, Roy gained work with his old Charter House neighbours, A & K Henderson. He remembers the mercurial Kingsley

Henderson (1883-1942) as 'a great friend of mine' and, in an office of about twenty, soon rose to the position of senior draftsman. His younger colleagues included a teenaged Robin Boyd who, Roy wryly recalls, was later dismissed after writing an unflattering review of a Henderson building in the student broadsheet *Smudges*. During his three years with Henderson, Roy remembers designing 'a couple of city buildings'. He recalls working on a branch of the Union Bank in Little Collins Street (1937) and one of Henderson's most famous projects, the MLC building on the corner of Collins and Elizabeth streets (1938; demolished 1972). The office began to wind down at the start of the War, but Henderson arranged for Roy to take a position with

one of the firm's most important clients – the T&G Company – as a property officer for insurance claims. Around that time, Roy also designed a house for himself and his new wife, Nance, in Leura Avenue, Hawthorn, in a Tudor Revival style far removed from the Deco stylings of Henderson's office.

The foregoing provides only a very brief review of a very small part of the eminent career of Roy Riggall Prentice. Indeed, the immediate post-war years saw him work for such noted architects as Frank Heath, Best Overend, and even a stint with the Public Works Department under Percy Everett, before the Housing Commission beckoned in 1958. But that is another story for another time. Until then, happy birthday, Roy, and my warmest congratulations.

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1934 Centenary street lighting, courtesy Robin Grow



White House, Regent's Park, London, by Robert Atkinson (1935-36), photograph by Simon Reeves, 2005.