

CONTENTS

FEATURES

- | | |
|---|-----------|
| Potts Point/Elizabeth Bay – A National Treasure | 5 |
| <i>by Peter Sheridan AM</i> | |
| Playing Cards – History & Intracies of Manufacture | 10 |
| <i>by Tom Hudson</i> | |
| Is Nice, is Nice | 14 |
| <i>by Robin Grow</i> | |
| Eliel Saarinen, Architect and Designer | |
| – His Finnish Period and Hvittrask | 18 |
| <i>by Elliot Katz and Julie Lord</i> | |
| How Wunderlich Coloured Australia | |
| Part 3 – The Art Deco Showroom | 22 |
| <i>by Barry Clare</i> | |
| Post-war Churches in South Australia Part 1: 1953 – 1961 | 26 |
| <i>by Chris Burns</i> | |
| An Egyptian Odyssey | |
| – Thomas Cook and the SS Sudan | 30 |
| <i>by Julie Lord</i> | |

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POTTS POINT/ELIZABETH BAY – A NATIONAL TREASURE

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Situated on the southern side of the harbour just 2km from Sydney's CBD the Potts Point (PP) / Elizabeth Bay (EB) area is a tiny enclave of just 1sq km in area with 17000 inhabitants. It is a unique urban environment in Australia for several reasons.

PP and EB were, if not the first suburbs of Sydney, definitely the first exclusive suburbs. In the mid-to-late 1800s they were suburbs of grand villas; at the turn of the century dotted with rows of Victorian terraces; spreading upwards in the 1920s -1940s with apartment blocks to provide living space for people who worked in the city; in the 1950s, a centre for bohemians, artists, actors; in the 1970s to 1990s an offshoot of Kings Cross with its nightlife, drugs and organised crime. Today, as Kings Cross diminishes both in size and effect, PP and EB have again become desirable places to live and to visit, close to the city and harbour with tree-lined streets and some of Sydney's best coffee shops and restaurants.

Macleay Street runs South to North down a ridge which defines the area. Many of the area's suburb or street names (e.g., Potts Point, Elizabeth Bay, MacLeay St, Wylde St) reflect important or senior people in the fledgeling

city's administration or commerce who were given tracts of land here. By 1831 seventeen grants of land had been made on Woolloomooloo Hill to a selection of the most politically and economically powerful men in the colony. The purpose of the grants was to establish a stylish area of housing, and for this reason they were subject to certain provisos. Residences were to be erected within three years at a cost in excess of £1,000 and had to face Government House across the bay. The 1860s saw further subdivisions and by the early 1900s there were dozens of elegant villas and mansions along the shoreline.

Between 1933 and 1941 over 40% of all the dwellings built in Sydney were flats and this area was a favoured site at that time for new apartment buildings in the Art Deco style, with over 70 remaining today. In the 1960s some 30 Modernist buildings were added usually at the expense of old mansions. This combination gives the area historical charm to add to the vibrance of the local community which is more diverse than any other in Australia. Inhabitants today represent the widest range of lifestyles - a cross section of wealthy down-sizers, artists and intellectuals, backpackers, Air-B&Bs, all members of

THIS PAGE:
Wyldefel, Brogan (1936)



UPPER:
Boomerang,
Hampson (1926)

LOWER LEFT:
Kingsley Hall, Sodersten
(1929) and El Alamein
Fountain, Woodward &
Taranto (1961)

LOWER RIGHT:
Gemini, Seidler (1969)

the LGBTI community, professionals, singles, retirees, and young couples with babies/kids, and every variety of small dog imaginable!

There is more varied heritage architecture in PP/EB than in other precincts in Australia, ranging from nine 19th century Colonial mansions and rows of Victorian terraces, through to a smattering of apartments blocks in Arts and Craft and Federation style from the early 20th century. Then follows the explosion of Art Deco apartment blocks through the 1930s and 40s, accounting for a third of the apartment blocks in the area.

In the 1960s, coincident with the creation of strata title for ownership of flats, there was a surge of Modernist apartment blocks in the area. Fortunately, all the Deco and Modernist apartment blocks are no more than 12 storeys in height (except for the Gazebo). Even the recent modern apartment blocks have been retained at 10-12 storeys with only two multi-storey tower apartment blocks

that are common in other parts of Sydney. All of this has preserved the 19th and 20th century heritage landscape and profile, making this one of Sydney's special places to live in and to visit. Arguably the area also has one of the best 20th Century houses in Sydney — Boomerang (1926), which is Spanish Mission, containing some striking Art Deco decorative features.

Today, the substantial number of Art Deco apartment blocks in this area help to create a sense of continuity and legacy for the community. Sixty percent of apartments are 1 bedroom or studios, and these are generally found in the smaller 3-4 storey walk-ups, which were originally designed for rental to city workers and single people. The larger apartment blocks with lifts (up to 11 storeys) were aimed at a wealthier clientele, with 2 and 3-bedroom apartments which could be individually owned via Company Title. These buildings often provided modern facilities (refrigeration, dining, service) as well as shops on the ground floor to



provide important daily amenities to the owners. Examples include Macleay Regis, Franconia, Meudon, Ashdown, Birtley Towers, Caversham Court.

One of the cultural and social changes that inspired the growth of apartments in Sydney was the 'social crisis' after WWI when young people did not wish to be domestics and sought other jobs close to the city, whereas wealthy people in large suburban homes could not get live-in staff. The Macleay Regis (1939) is perhaps the most elegant of the large apartment blocks along Macleay Street.

Very few of the area's Art Deco apartment blocks had garages — exceptions being Macleay Regis, Birtley Towers, Del Rio, Bellevue Gardens, Chatsbury and 17 Wylde St — and in these cases the number of garages were a small fraction of the number of apartments in a building. As the vast majority rented and only one in four families had a car by 1940, most people relied on the improving standard of public transport (trains, trams, buses and ferries) to get

around. The Modernist buildings provided more garages and car spaces, adjusting to the boom in car ownership in the 1960s, but with often limited visitor parking.

Art Deco was an important design aesthetic because it spread globally into countries such as Australia which, in the first part of the 20th century, was predominantly British in its outlook. As the century progressed, better communication and easier travel allowed quicker transmission of new ideas and approaches to architecture and design to reach Australia. The influence of emigre architects was also important as they brought a different cosmopolitan ethos as well as their direct connections with the new design schools of Europe and America.

Two of the most important architects in Australian architecture of the 20th century are prominently represented in the PP/EB area - Emil Sodersten with five Art Deco masterpieces and Harry Seidler with five Modernist gems. Sodersten was the master of Art Deco

UPPER LEFT:
Birtley Towers,
Sodersten (1934)

UPPER CENTRE:
Adereham Hall,
McKinnon, Gordon &
Sons (1934)

UPPER RIGHT:
Ashdown, Bolot (1940)

LOWER LEFT:
Brickwork detail -
Wychbury, Sodersten
(1934)

LOWER RIGHT:
Del Rio, Stanfield (1927)



UPPER:
Metro Theatre,
Dellit (1939)

CENTRE:
5 Onslow Place,
Stossel (1951)

LOWER:
17 Wyld St,
Bolot (1950)



particularly with his decorative brickwork — e.g., Kingsley Hall (1929), Werrington (1930), Birtley Towers (1934), Wychbury (1934)) — but showing quite different designs before and after a trip overseas to Europe in the mid-1930s e.g., Marlborough Hall (1938). Seidler brought the Bauhaus to Australia through his experience with luminaries such as Gropius, Breuer and Aalto — e.g., Ithaca Gardens (1960), Aquarius (1965), Ercildoune (1965), Gemini (1969), International Lodge (1970).

While Sodersten and Seidler are clearly icons of their respective styles, Aaron Bolot and Hugo Stossel both straddled the Deco/Modernist divide. Bolot's two buildings in this area highlight his important influence on the evolution of Australian architecture in the mid-20th century with perhaps some of this innovativeness attributed to his time with Walter Burley Griffin who worked with Frank Lloyd Wright. Bolot's Ashdown (1938) and John Brogan's Wyldefel (1936) are the best examples in Sydney of Functionalist Art Deco or European Modernism with clean white render and the curved elements being a fundamental part of the fabric of the buildings.

Bolot's 17 Wyld St (1950) was innovative for its time with no name and being a Community Cooperative title (an early form of strata title). It was one of the first curved buildings in Sydney with the east and north facing facades of glass windows in horizontal bands providing not only harbour panoramas, but natural light, winter sun and natural ventilation for living rooms and bedrooms. A strong horizontal appearance due to almost continuous bands of windows and balconies helps to make this building a landmark in the area and a fitting transition from Art Deco to the Modernist era.

Stossel, an emigre architect like Seidler, appears at the end of the Deco period with St Ursula (5 Onslow Place), but flourishes in the Modernist period of the 1960s with another five apartment buildings in the area — Chimes (1964), Tor (1965), Denison (1966), Macleay Gardens (1967), Bayview (1968).

The Metro Theatre (1939) in PP is one of the few commercial Art Deco buildings in the area and one of the most important example of Streamlined Art Deco live/movie theatres in Australia. The original design was by Bruce Dellit who also designed the NSW War Memorial in Hyde Park, but his early demise meant the building was completed by Crick & Furse who designed some forty Art Deco theatres in NSW. For some time, the Metro has been under threat of being substantially modified. In a welcome move, it has recently been added to the NSW Heritage Register.

Few of the Art Deco and Modernist buildings in PP/EB are heritage listed individually, but even less appreciated is the volume and quality of the examples and the contribution to the ambience of the neighbourhood. It is the concentrated hub of heritage architecture and, most particularly, the Art Deco apartments that gives the precinct its historical charm, making the PP/EB area an unappreciated national treasure akin to Napier in NZ and Miami's South Beach in Florida.