

24 Hill Street, Toorak



History and Description

Roy Grounds, who, with Frederick Romberg and Robin Boyd, is regarded as among Australia's most influential architects between 1935 and 1960, was awarded the 1954 annual Street Architecture Medal of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects, for the design of his house and flats at Hill Street, Toorak.¹⁷⁴ The ground plan of the building is shown in an MMBW drainage plan dated 1955.¹⁷⁵ This plan shows flats 1, 2, 3, 4. Flat 1 was the architect's house. It was the third that Grounds designed for himself and was closely related to his use of geometric forms. It was described in 1981 in these words:

'A tree stood on the site, so Grounds based the house round a circular courtyard to accommodate the tree. The perimeter of the house was a square, with softly texture brick walls rising to a continuous clerestory that gave the roof a floating appearance.... Three flats were attached to the house in a chain stretching towards the rear of the site. Each employed a double height living space, with kitchen and bathroom opening off the ground floor and bedrooms opening off first floor level'.¹⁷⁶

The larger flat built closest to the street is striking in its 'brutalist' simplicity, featuring the flat roof, horizontal strip windows and cement rendered walls typical of Modern architecture. The very wide central door and fine architectural details in the fenestration and eaves, plus the slate pavement in front of the building, planted with

174. Conrad Hamann, 'Grounds, Romberg and Boyd', in *Architects of Australia*, pp. 129, 136.

175. MMBW House Cover No. 267681.

176. Hamann, p. 136.

bamboo, are features which highlight the sculptural qualities of the building. Neil Clerehan praised the design in *Architecture* in 1955:

'This house was but a part of a scheme comprising three studio apartments, a small unit and the owner's residence. The maisonettes grouped to the rear could best be described as a sortie into the spectacular. Deceptively simple in detail and finish they consisted of a minimum of services grouped beside an enormous double height studio. The effect when entering through a compressed hallway into this space shatters the most cynical visitor. That these investment-units proved popular indicated that the latent, seldom satisfied desire in Australia for more beautiful living space, no matter the cost'.¹⁷⁷

Grounds had an interest in the geometric plan form from his earliest student days. He had been influenced by Modern architecture in his travels to Britain and North America between 1929 and 1932. Shortly after returning to Australia and setting up private practice with Geoffrey Mewton, his Henty House at Frankston was acclaimed as 'the best house in Victoria in this century' by the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects. In 1935, his design for the Watt House in Toorak was hailed as Victoria's first genuinely International Style building by Robyn Boyd. The Watt House was also designed around a tree which existed on the site and the building was reduced to a complete absence of detailing. Like the Hill Street flats, the Watt House was finished with lightly bagged brickwork painted a pastel colour.¹⁷⁸ In 1940 he designed a fan-shaped block of flats called Quamby at Toorak. It was his first break with the rectangle and a development which culminated in a series of pure geometrically formed buildings in the 1950s.¹⁷⁹ According to Freeland,

'In and around Melbourne he erected houses in the plan-form of circles, triangles and a square pierced by a hole in the middle He was a man of extraordinary inventiveness, a master of clever detailing..... Grounds geometric buildings were light and graceful, deceptively simple, refined and elegant...'.¹⁸⁰

Grounds was in partnership with Romberg and Boyd between 1953 and 1961. Other important geometric buildings designed by Grounds included his Australian Academy of Science building in Canberra (1957-1959) and the Victorian Arts Centre (1959).¹⁸¹

Significance

This post-Second World War building has state significance on architectural grounds. It is a fine example of the domestic work of Roy Grounds, who is regarded as among Australia's most influential Modern architects between 1935 and 1960. It is the third house the architect designed for himself and exhibits his masterly use of geometric forms, and represents a continuation of a design approach he developed as early as

177. Clerehan p.22.

178. Hamann, p.130.

179. J. M. Freeland, *Architecture in Australia*, p. 276).

180. Freeland, p. 276.

181. Hamann, pp. 129, 130-131, 138.

1935. It won the 1954 Street Architecture Medal of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects.

Sources

Clerehan, N. 'Roy Grounds' in *Architecture*, Jan-Mar 1955, pp.22-23.

Freeland, J. M., *Architecture in Australia*, 1968.

Hamann, C. 'Grounds, Romberg and Boyd' in H. Tanner (Ed.), *Architects of Australia*, 1981.

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RVIA (Royal Victorian Institute of Architects) *Bulletin* Dec. - Jan. 1954-55; 1957.

Analysis & Recommendations

It is recommended that this property be retained at A1 level.