

9. History

The Mayor of Prahran, Cr Bill Dane officially opened the then Prahran City Council's new Library and community facilities on 19th August 1973.

The Library section of the development replaced two small branch libraries in South Yarra and Toorak Village. Other facilities in the new centre included a theatrette and meeting rooms which are made available to the residents and ratepayers free of charge. Total cost of the building and land was \$873,000 which was \$17,000 less than the council had originally estimated.

Opened just prior to a local election, controversy occurred when Cr Keith Nicholls challenged the Mayor Cr Dane about the cost of each book borrowed from the library as a high \$1.13. The mayor subsequently supported the new Library by saying it was money well spent and the cost per book did not relate to the total cost of the other facilities the Library also offered. Three days prior to the opening of the Library a special council meeting was held to discuss allegations that library construction finance approvals had been signed without the authority of council aimed at speeding the completion before local elections - one day before the opening.

Cr Keith Nicholls tabled at the meeting a copy of a supplementary contract signed by Cr Lux that made it appear that some misallocation of public funds, a sum of \$4250 had taken place. It was moved that an inquiry take place however Cr Gordon Wilson said it was the opinion of many residents that the subject had been bought up as an election gimmick. Construction cost of \$215 per square metre had also been compared to the \$194 cost of the St Kilda Public Library (by Sydney architect and Frank Lloyd Wright disciple Peter Muller) completed at the same time.

Construction team:

Architects	Yuncken Freeman Architects Pty Ltd
Structural Engineers	Irwin, Johnston & Partners Pty Ltd
Mechanical Engineers	Lobley Tiedel & Partners Pty Ltd
Quantity Surveyors	Wolferstan Trower & Partners

10. Description

10.1 physical:

A highly articulated steel framed, grey glass box housing entry, lending and children's Library, 24 study carrels and service core is located over a rendered masonry base containing offices, theatrette, meeting room, toilets and service areas. The upper floor slab cantilevers about a metre past the supporting basement walls at the front and back but the side walls are in almost the same plane. On the upper level 200 mm universal columns set 3.0 metres apart support solar grey glass. All steel work is painted matt black. the upper floor ceiling has a smooth white plaster finish. The original carpet was a brilliant vermilion colour. At the rear, a vehicle ramp allows access to the basement facilities, service and car parking. At the Toorak Road frontage a pair of ramps form pedestrian links to the street. Bordered on three sides by Toorak, Cromwell and Surrey Road North the building is set between flanking lawn areas dotted with grids of trees on the east and west. Each lawn contains 36 birch trees planted to shade the glass external walls from the low morning and afternoon sun. Directly opposite over Toorak Road are Rockley Gardens adding to the spacious landscape setting of the Library.

10.2 context:

Set to the east of the busy commercial intersection of Toorak Road and Chapel Street the Library is the major local government feature in the precinct. Recent developments further up Toorak Road sees the Library now competing with multi-storey residential complexes, while small terrace cottages still prevail immediately behind the Library in Surrey Road North. Conceptually the Library forms part of an edge between commercial activities in Chapel Street and the residential streets of Toorak and South Yarra

10.3 present use:

Library

10.4 Present condition:

Generally good condition with the original spaces and functions intact. Carpet and internal colour schemes have been changed. Landscape and external carpark/service areas remain broadly unchanged, but with one or two additional birch trees probably self-sown. The planting on the north side has been allowed to become overgrown, obscuring the monumental qualities of the building.

11. Evaluation and comparative analysis

Modernism and minimalism

The Toorak/South Yarra Branch Library is a significant local example of a refined, minimalist yet classical approach to design, which was a significant genre in post war modernism internationally.

The Library is expressed as a black glass and steel box, clearly elevated as an object floating above its immediate context. The clarity of the black box is not diminished by any sort of complication.

As in the supremacist art of the 1910s the black box represents the purists black square that compresses all the stuff of life into one unifying whole form. This requires a leap of perception for the viewer of the painting and in the case of architecture the everyday user and occupant. Librarians are still commenting negatively about the inflexible spaces and uncompromising building systems. It is not the architecture of the everyday so ideas are not always immediately accessible to some users. Parkland voids either side of the Library press the city away - renouncing it as a source of noise and chaos.

A public monument has been erected away from the everyday public realm. Its significance as an institution has been clearly articulated. As in Mies Van Der Rohe's Seagram Building, New York, 1954-58, where two fountains feature in the forecourt, two ramps at the Library compress the scale of the forecourt allowing no place for people to linger, repose or contemplate.

The Library steps backward from Toorak Road and remains silent. A minimalist form symbolising the apparent victory of knowledge over commerce. The upper level black box is cantilevered over its masonry base on the east and west sides. This slip effect subverts the classical notion of pedestal, wall and roof trabeated construction in forming a dematerialised floating effect.

Two opposing systems are expressed in the Library - the classicism of the Prahran and Malvern Town Hall buildings and the expressed lightness of new technologies. Upper level Library facilities are enclosed in a clear, single span unitary volume that creates an immaterial and weightless, geometrically unbounded space telescoping outward to landscape and street activities beyond. An archetypal form of openness is created to express the inherently public space of the municipal institution. Clear structural spans culminate at external columns where in tandem with large float glass panels they form an articulated membrane or skin of façade elements. Structural frame and glass infill are designed to fuse visually each losing part of its identity to establish the new architectural reality.

The opposing systems are also expressed spatially within the Library being obviously symmetrical in its form and layout and therefore axial and classical in its manifestation. A paradox is prevalent here when this symmetry is collided with the apparent openness of the open archetypal, transparent spaces. As in Mies Van Der Rohe's Illinois Institute of Technology Crown Hall, everything that challenges the monumental nature of book stands such as office partitions or toilets are banished to the basement. Nothing must compromise the Palladian symmetrical balance however anachronistic this seems to the free transparent ideals of the black box.

As in Mies' Seagram Building and IIT buildings and their derivatives in the other work of Yuncken Freeman, especially BHP House, the Library has all the ideas of bigger buildings. Perhaps the clearest example is the plaza at the front separating the building from the street. The modernist object set back

across a plaza has been cited as a major cause of disruption to streetscape and patterns of urban settlement. The Library has a small abstract plaza that works in delicately drawing the line between the civic nature of the building and the everyday.

The refined, minimalist yet classical approach has few parallels in Australia, and was first developed in the United States. The closest parallels of the single level, transparent elevated 'temple' form include Mies' Crown Hall, Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago, the post office at his Federal Centre, Chicago, and Berlin Art Gallery, which all employ the simple black steel structure, dark tinted glass, and open plan interiors of the Toorak South Yarra Library.

Phillip Johnson developed a residential version, with his 'Glass House' in New Canaan, Connecticut, though in this case, white. Mies' approach and aesthetic was highly influential for large buildings, with the Chicago based office of Skidmore Owings and Merrill producing numerous designs in black steel and glass. Variations on this theme were built in the US and around the world, in the 1960s and 70s by this internationally famous firm. In Victoria, architects such as Grounds, Romberg, and Boyd experimented with lightness, and pure geometry, but avoided any sense of classical refinement, or minimalism.

Yuncken Freeman

The firm of Yuncken Freeman began their career with the structurally adventurous Myer Music Bowl of 1957. About a decade later, they began to produce refined commercial buildings (ie State Office Block, Scottish Amicable, Royal Insurance, BHP, all separately classified, and their own offices in King Street of 1967) It would seem that the Toorak South Yarra Library was one of their last works in this mode. The King Street office is the most similar, involving black steel and glass detailing, with a first floor cantilevering over the setback ground floor. Located on a corner site, the setback only occurs on the front and side elevations, and the building is flanked by a much larger building to the south. Their offices therefore do not have the advantage of a spacious, open setting, with the result that it does not have the pure form or monumentality of the Library.

Guilford Bell

At the smaller scale, the celebrated, but not self-promoted, Guilford Bell produced a large body of what was probably the most similarly refined architecture of the period, though a classical sensibility informs his work as much as modernist minimalism. He designed numerous houses, always formally planned, employing a regular grid of columns, with refined, restrained detailing. Whilst classically inspired, none of his houses has the monumentality of the Toorak South Yarra Library.

12. References

Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture a Critical History*

Henry Russell Hitchcock, *The International Style*

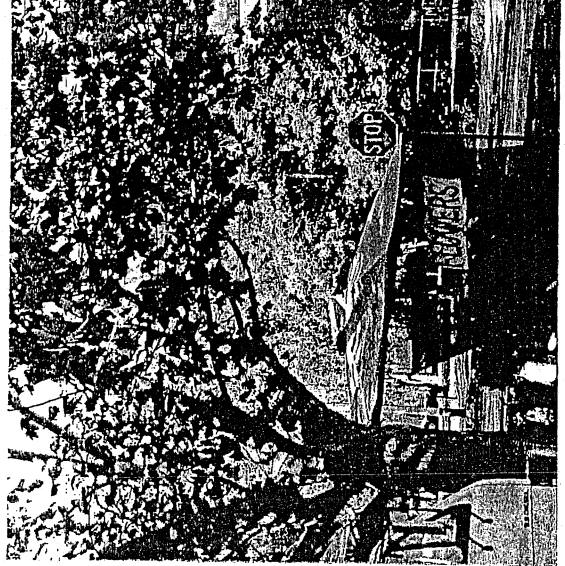
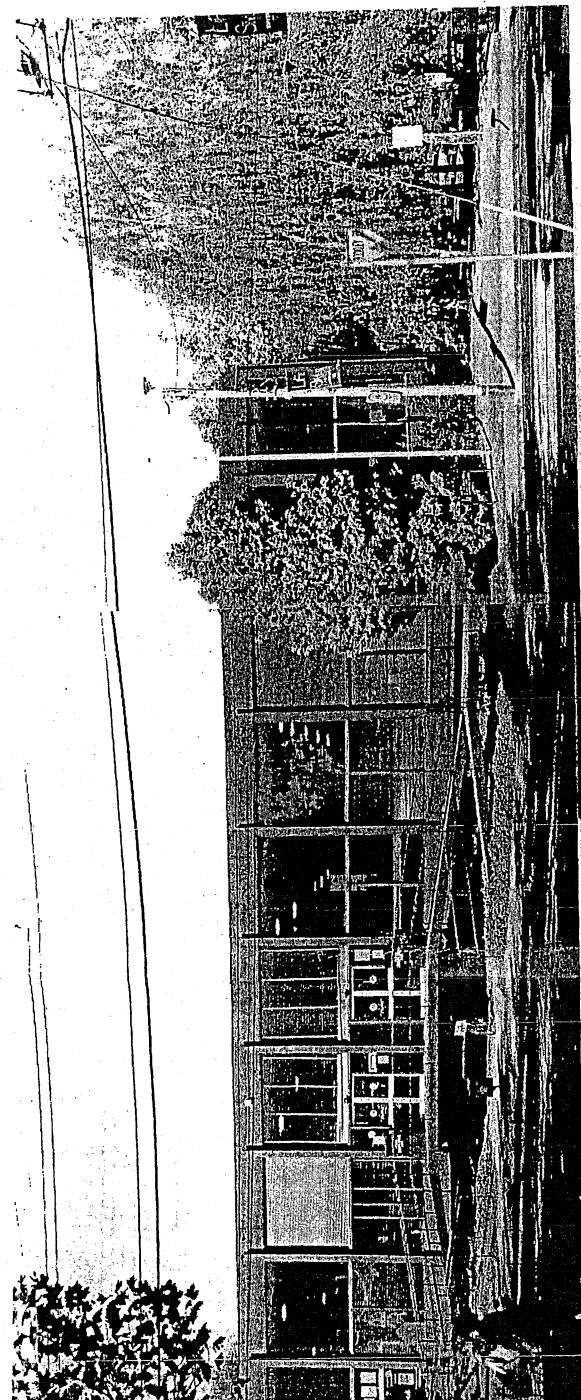
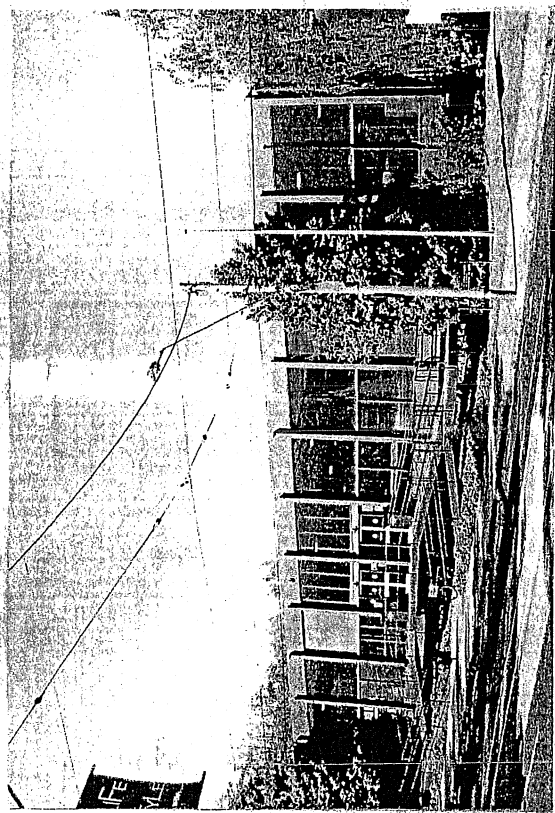
Manfredo Tafuri/Francesco Dal Co, *Modern Architecture 1 & 2*

Architect, Victorian RAIA, September - October 1973

13. Appendices

Plans

Photographs



TOORAK ROAD

