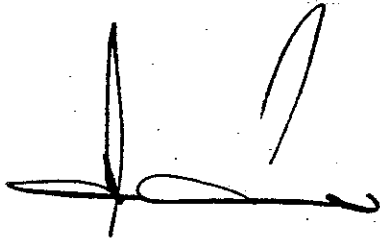


BEST OVEREND — PIONEER MODERNIST IN MELBOURNE

Philip Goad

In Part B of his 1947 book, *Victorian Modern*, Robin Boyd described the development of modern architecture in Victoria. He divided this half of the book into fourteen sub-sections, each one invariably focussing on the career of a prominent architect. Generally, each sub-section was headed by the same bold typography. One however was not. This sub-section was introduced by a flourishing, confident and indecipherable signature (Fig 1). It belonged to Best Overend.¹ Boyd



*Fig 1 Best Overend's signature,
c 1947. From Robin
Boyd, Victorian Modern,
p 21*

had condensed into this simple gesture Overend's special place in the history of early modernist architecture in Victoria. Best Overend was the charismatic personality of modernism. This paper aims to expand upon Boyd's brief thesis. Though well known for Cairo Flats, his 'early essay in downright functionalism',² Best Overend should, more significantly, be regarded as modernism's arch-publicist in 1930s Melbourne. With his noticeable bald head and bow tie, man about town Best Overend never missed an opportunity to promote himself, his ideas, and modern architecture. In addition, I wish to show that Overend's architecture in the 1930s shows a consistent pragmatic concession made to an Antipodean modernism. Though Overend argued forcibly for modern architecture using the charming analogy that there were no gable fronts on Boeing bombers,³ his built work (with a few notable exceptions) displays in the end exactly that prosaic precaution, an aesthetic revolution of open plans and unadorned walls that inevitably also carries the great Australian roof.

Life

Acheson Best Overend was born on the 15 October 1909 at Launceston, Tasmania.⁴ His father, Harold Acheson Overend, was a Methodist

minister and his mother, Emily Trahair, was a shrewd businesswoman who had inherited considerable monies from her father. An only boy with five sisters, Best was educated at Wesley College, Melbourne where his cousin, Robert Eggleston,⁵ who was two years younger, remembers him as a natural leader.⁶ From 1926, Overend became an articled pupil in the office of architect H. Vivian Taylor.⁷ An unusual figure in Melbourne architectural circles, Taylor was an expert in acoustics and specialised in the design of cinemas and radio stations. As Ross Thorne has noted,⁸ when the talkies arrived, Taylor and his firm altered over four hundred cinemas throughout Australia to produce acceptable acoustics as well as designed a large number of new cinemas. Taylor also had the eccentric habit of making his site inspections by sitting in the car with a set of field glasses.⁹ While in this office, Best Overend worked on the additions to the Station 2AY Broadcasting Studio in Albury, 1930, the remodelling of the Crown Theatre for HO Peterson Esq. and an undated project for the so-called 'Independent House', Melbourne.¹⁰ At the same time, Best was studying architecture at Swinburne Technical College and later during the evenings at the University of Melbourne Architectural Atelier.¹¹ In 1929 he also completed a course in geometric drawing in concrete structure from the International Correspondence School in Sydney.¹² As young students, Best with Bob Eggleston, Gerard Osborne and Bill Hansom would meet before atelier evenings at Mario's Bistro in Exhibition Street, discuss architectural matters in earnest and brazenly draw on the linen tablecloths with their 6B pencils.¹³ At the Atelier, E Keith Cheetham, a nervous, highly talented and effeminate aesthete stood in for a short time for the serious Leighton Irwin while he was overseas. With his theatrical manner which encouraged the idea of the architect as romantic artiste, Cheetham was an influential teacher.¹⁴ At the same time, virtually every student had the same aim: as soon as they had finished the rigorous Atelier course, they would head overseas. For Best and his friend Keith McKay, this was their immediate goal.¹⁵ The Depression added fuel to the desire to escape Melbourne. Colleagues who had already left included John Scarborough, Harry Winbush, Oscar Bayne, Roy Grounds and Geoffrey Mewton. In London, Australian architects were well received and eagerly sought because they showed more initiative than English draftsmen who seemed not to wish to move beyond their designated station. They were also preferred over young English architects who were simply not prepared to work hard to earn their spurs.¹⁶ Thus in London, for the ambitious Australian, there was excellent work experience to be had.

Overseas

When Best Overend left Melbourne in early 1931 for London, he didn't know where or for whom he was going to work. Expatriate Raymond McGrath was the only name which many Australians knew before they left and indeed it was McGrath for whom Best worked in the first months of his arrival.¹⁷ By July 1931,¹⁸ Overend had moved to a different office to work for the architect who would shape his future career as a committed modernist. His new employer was 'wonderful Wells', the dashing Wells Coates PhD, BSc, BA, Architect, 'speeding in his Lancia, breaking women's hearts: free untrammelled man, mythic figure of the thirties'.¹⁹

Best Overend spent just over eighteen months as Chief Draftsman for Wells Coates.²⁰ It was an experience that profoundly influenced the young Australian. Coates, with his Ronald Colman moustache, cut a striking figure in London. He was outside the established retinue of architects. He had not been educated in London and he did not pursue an ordinary line of architectural practice. He was the artist-technologist, an engineer, a designer, an architect, a man of the world with a mania for fast cars and sailing yachts. Coates was to describe himself as 'passionate, mystical, proud, inquisitive and fearless.'²¹ Overend also had a passion for cars and Bob Eggleston recalls Best's spontaneous driving excursions to Portsea.²² His first car was a Bugatti. Other Overend cars included a great big German 'Metallurgique' and a 'Stoewer'. In later life, he also owned an E-type Jaguar. Working therefore for Wells Coates suited young Best immensely. He was a kindred spirit.

In Coates's office, the young 22-year old worked on the fashionable and innovative Cresta Silks Shops; the stylish and austere modern interiors for No.1 Kensington Palace Gardens for Mr and Mrs George Strauss, 1931; the Venesta Stand at the Brewers' Exhibition, November 1931, with its ultra-modern demonstration of plywood; the Venesta Stand for the Building Trades Exhibition of 1932; and another modish interior for No 2 Devonshire Street for Dr. Pryn's Hopkins which had been designed by Wells Coates in association with David Pleydell Bouverie.²³

The most significant work however for Overend, and for which his experience with H. Vivian Taylor had obviously stood him in good stead, was the documentation in 1931 of the interiors of Broadcast House, the new headquarters of the British Broadcasting Commission and one of the most prestigious commissions of the decade. Wells Coates together with Serge Chermayeff and Raymond McGrath had been given the task

of fitting out the studio interiors and designing their equipment and furnishings. Of the Coates-designed interiors where art and science were to meet, and all documented by Best Overend²⁴ including the adjustable rotating tables and the counterbalancing microphones, the *Architectural Review* was to say:

... the more severely functional rooms were delivered to Mr. Wells Coates who has made charming play with dramatic control tables, gramophone counters, observation windows and the like. Mr. Coates's rooms and their fittings are the finest achievement in the building and they show what the phrase 'design in industry' would mean if an introduction were effected between Mr. Coates and a few industrialists.²⁵

While working on these interiors which were to become landmarks of British modernist design of the 1930s, Overend also passed his RIBA examinations in 1932 with his drawings amongst others, of the modernistic 'Cauliflower au Gratin' Motor Coach Inn and his design for 'A Small Town Hall in a Country Town' which happened to go by the name of Kalgoorlie.²⁶ At the time, Overend was living in the YMCA in Tottenham Court Road,²⁷ a location which, with its Methodist connections, appealed to Best. Together with Keith McKay, Best also joined the Architectural Association in nearby Bedford Square where Francis Yerbury and Howard Robertson were teaching. Overend was well regarded in London amongst the small group of progressive architects. In September 1931, 'a foreign chappie', Serge Chermayeff (whose office adjoined McGrath's), had offered Best a job doing the drawings and calculations for a concrete house he had designed for himself. Wells refused to let Best work for Chermayeff, a gesture which gave the young Australian a feeling of some pride.²⁸

Practice in Melbourne

Best Overend returned to Melbourne in March 1933.²⁹ In May, he was admitted to a partnership with H Vivian Taylor and G A Soilleux, architects of 499 Little Collins Street,³⁰ and shortly afterwards was elected an Associate of the RVIA.³¹ Now known as Messrs H Vivian Taylor, Soilleux and Overend, the firm continued its speciality in cinema design. Of particular note amongst the large number of cinemas designed by the new partnership were the ultra-moderne interiors for the Windsor Theatre, Albert Street, Windsor, 1936 and especially the Padua Theatre, Brunswick, 1937, with its streamlined teardrop shaped ticket box built in steel and glass, and finished in a green lacquer, the aerodynamic central feature of the red and vermilion tiled foyer floor.³² Other commissions amidst the huge number of cinemas included service stations in Carlton and in Flinders Street at Queens Bridge, 1933³³ and

the installation of a new heating system in Joseph Reed's Independent Church in Collins Street in 1934.³⁴

One of Overend's first commissions in the partnership was the design of the Armytage House, Mont Albert Road, Balwyn, 1933.³⁵ Of this house, the *Australian Home Beautiful* described 'the simplicity of smooth flush surfaces of materials, beautiful in themselves, has a distinct and inherent dignity, and this principle has determined the form and finish of this house both externally and internally.'³⁶ Yet for reasons of sun protection, the eaves overhang of the tiled hip roof was 0.91 m all around the house. The distinctly domestic image of this roof was a bold counterpoint to the uncompromisingly severe surfaces, ship handrails,

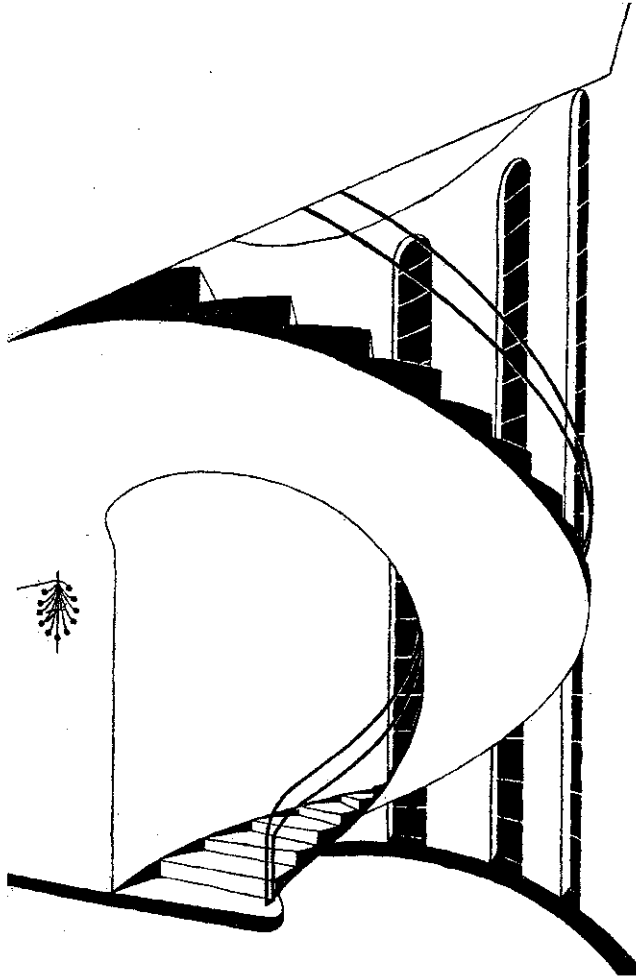


Fig 2

Staircase, Armytage House, Balwyn, 1933. Architects, H Vivian Taylor, Soilleux & Overend. Drawing by Best Overend. From 'The Staircase', Manuscripts, No 8, February 1934, p 33

concrete cantilever balconies, and reinforced concrete entry porch canopy which was supported off two slender steel posts. Within the stair

hall, an unsupported circular concrete stair climbed in an even sweep from the ground to the first floor (Fig 2).

While each of Overend's house designs for the partnership possessed the stylistic vocabulary of the International Style, the flat roof rarely appeared. The Finlay House, Belmont Avenue, Balwyn, 1933-34³⁷ had smooth stuccoed wall surfaces on a dark brick base with large steel framed Chicago windows, and it also possessed the typical tiled hip roof, as did a house in Ledbury Court, Toorak, 1936³⁸ and also the pair of maisonettes in Canterbury Road, Toorak for Mr and Mrs J C McElroy.³⁹ Once again the palette of clinker brick, generous areas of steel framed windows, curving concrete balconies, and a sweeping external concrete stair, all topped by a tiled hip roof was the order of the day. In the perspective sketches of these houses, the house with its dramatic wide eaves always appeared to have a flat roof. It was as if Overend recognised that the fiction of the flat roof below the eaves line could satisfy the building's modernity but for the house to be built it would require the pragmatics of tiles and a timber frame. This double intent is evidenced by design drawings held in the Best Overend archives where flat roofed alternatives were placed against those without.⁴⁰ Other anomalies where purity of style were concerned included the Washington House, Mildura, 1933, which was designed in a Spanish manner but its windows were steel framed, there was a roof terrace and a concrete slab was employed.⁴¹

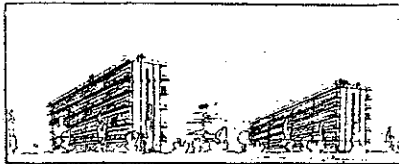
Publicist

Best Overend managed to get virtually every one of these houses of altered modern pedigree published during the 1930s. He also began writing himself and was published in *The Argus* newspaper, the *Australian Home Beautiful*, an arty magazine from Geelong entitled *Manuscripts*, and the gossip weekly *Table Talk*, Melbourne's version of *Punch*.. He was also interviewed by the *Argus* in February 1934⁴² about the design of a children's nursery. Child education was a preoccupation of progressive people in the 1930s and Overend advocated an adjacent sun balcony, careful choice of colours, tubular electrical heating for safety. The article was illustrated with a prize-winning nursery design from a recent English ideal homes competition which showed strip windows, tubular steel furniture, loose rugs, and a polished timber floor.

In June 1934, Overend began writing the weekly 'Architecture and Property' column in the Melbourne *Argus*. For the next twelve months,⁴³ he promoted modernism each week to a general audience, as well as publicising contemporary Melbourne works of progressive

architecture such as Norman Seabrook's MacRobertson's Girls High School.⁴⁴ His first article of 28 June 1934 was a safe appraisal of a garden design by Messrs W & R Butler and a description of the extensions to the Victoria Palace by Alec S Eggleston.⁴⁵ But in the articles that followed, Overend championed new materials and new construction techniques, open planning, steel framed windows, built-in furniture, folding wall beds, sliding curtains instead of walls, reforms to kitchen and bathroom design, the promotion of modern well-designed flats,⁴⁶ the flat roof and roof terraces with flagstones set in grass accompanied by quotes from a 'famous Continental architect',⁴⁷ and a plea in February 1935 for the bachelor flat⁴⁸ which in essence was an argument for Cairo which was then on the drawing boards. He often illustrated his articles with examples of overseas buildings and these included Lubetkin and Tecton's Penguin Pool at Regent's Park Zoo,⁴⁹ Wells Coates's first Cresta Silk Shop, Brompton Road, London, 1929,⁵⁰ the roof terrace of an unidentified International Style house in Europe,⁵¹ Mies van der Rohe's Tugendat House, 1930⁵² and International Style houses in Zurich and Austria.⁵³

One article in December 1934 showed a perspective drawing by Overend for a 'possible development' of six storey apartment blocks, one flat in thickness spaced apart to permit daylight and sunshine to enter every room with access balconies to the rear. The scheme was essentially a series of minimal flats stacked together to form slab blocks separated by parklands. Overend argued that it was just this sort of building that one could imagine being built in East Melbourne, over the railway yards, or in the inner city areas just north of the city (Fig 3).⁵⁴



A POSSIBLE DEVELOPMENT
The block buildings, one flat in thickness, spaced apart to permit daylight and sunshine to enter every room. The buildings will be separated by parklands.

Fig 3 Project for a 'Possible Development', 1934. Drawing by Best Overend. From Best Overend, 'Housing Question: Social Implications', The Argus, 20 December 1934

Another article on flats illustrated the roof terrace of a London apartment building and the caption read:

Mass produced shelter — Mount Royal, London. Six hundred and fifty residential units in one building mounted upon a base of shops, restaurants and services. The top terrace like the promenade deck of a great liner, except this one looks over a sea of Hyde Park trees with the Marble Arch anchored immediately below.⁵⁵

Robin Boyd was to recall these articles in *Victorian Modern* when describing Overend's early career.⁵⁶ Though both the *Age* and *Argus* newspapers continued to have architecture and property sections during

the late 1930s, these columns had no regular named author. Overend's distinctive and lively style of writing leads one to speculate that the inspiration for the *Age* articles for the RVIA Small Homes Service, which were to become an integral part of that service's publicity of progressive design in the post-war decade under the directorship of Robin Boyd and Neil Clerehan, may indeed have been drawn from this series of *Argus* articles in 1934 and 1935, at a time when the young Robin Boyd would have been an impressionable 16 year old.

At a different and more specialised level, Overend also contributed to *Manuscripts*, a journal which was published for the Book Nook in Ryrie Street, Geelong and which mixed literature and the arts in its content. Cover designs and frontispieces were often woodcuts by Arthur Baldwinson who would later go to work for Walter Gropius in London. Keith Cheetham was also a contributor. Overend's first contribution in 1934 was a drawing in Issue No 8 of the curving unsupported stair⁵⁷ at the Armytage House which accompanied a low-key argument by Michael O'Connell for simplified interior design.⁵⁸ In Issue No 9, Overend wrote on the correlation between the modern architect, the modern engineer and modern materials. He stated that 'We seem to be on the threshold of another Architecture, or, shall we say, another period of its evolution.' For the architect, 'Principle or Specific Purpose, will be his gospel for Revival'.⁵⁹ Overend was arguing for the Architect-Engineer. The art of the beautiful was to be incidental to the conditions of economy of plan and economy of construction. Of equal interest though to this pompous prose was the following pronouncement:

What we need is gossip . . . about architecture . . . and not by Architects. Architecture should be something on which the working man has definite views. It must become a popular interest. The inclusion of architectural sections in our Press is a step towards the correct education, and consequently correct publicity, for Architecture. We would do well to study and control this medium, itself a product of this age and of no other.⁶⁰

Overend went on to champion steel, glass and reinforced concrete, metal window frames, plywood, the refrigerator and the telephone, and the seeming certainty of the 'communistic' home of the future. He argued for the truth of inherent decoration using his Japanese aphorism borrowed from Wells Coates, 'Of the thing itself, never on it' and illustrated his article with the tiers of cantilevered balconies of Alvar Aalto's Paimio Sanatorium in Finland, and the interior of a reinforced concrete church at Bischofsheim. In Issue No 11, Overend's contribution was not architectural but literary, a rather patchy evocative piece called 'The Road'.⁶¹ In Issue No 12, his article entitled 'This Worship of Decay',

was a diatribe against period styling using the arguments that a 1935 car and the Comet aeroplane had no need of Olde English ideals or criss-cross leadlights. He bemoaned:

Our village in Toorak has earnestly striven to crystallise an Old Worlde atmosphere, making the Chrysler Airflow a modern anachronism driven by people who would refuse to wear the doublet and hose of the period [which] the surroundings plagiarise.⁶²

In the same issue, Overend also favourably reviewed the celebration of art and the machine in Herbert Read's book *Art and Industry* and once again repeated his oft-quoted maxim, 'of the thing itself, never on it'.⁶³

Yet perhaps the most significant article written by Best Overend in the early 1930s was published just six months after his return to Melbourne. It appeared in September 1933 in the *Australian Home Beautiful* and was entitled 'A Minimum Flat with Maximum Comfort'.⁶⁴ In this article, Overend described the contemporary demand in London for the so-called 'minimum flat' and proceeded to illustrate his own ideas with a typical plan for a future apartment block.

The repetitive units of this *existenzminimum* apartment were connected by an external corridor which ran past each unit on the kitchenette side, giving access to the front door and an external delivery hatch to the pantry within (Fig 4). This corridor was to have a high balustrade and, at suitable points along this circulation route, lift and stair towers. The units were to average 5.3 by 6 metres with interlocking bath/dressing room units between each flat. Dividers within this space were essentially curtains with built-in coat cupboard, cabinet for a folding bed/divan, folding dining table and built-in bookshelves, radio unit, and cocktail cabinet. Facing north was the so-called 'Sun Wall', glazed with Vita Glass with a large fixed central panel and two flanking casements. This generous window apparently 'permits sunbathing in the home'.⁶⁵ The kitchenette was tiny, containing a small electric stove and refrigerator. Overend also suggested the possibility of a central restaurant service to relieve the tight conditions of this diminutive living cell. The fittings which extended to the 8 ft 6 in (2.6 m) ceiling were built from plywood and were to be the flush-finished internal structural walls of the flat. The floor was to be carpeted and the ceilings were to be of cane fibreboard apparently ensuring acoustic separation. There was no mention of heating or external balconies.

Inspiration for this innovative plan was almost certainly derived from two aspects of Overend's experience in London. In June and July 1933,

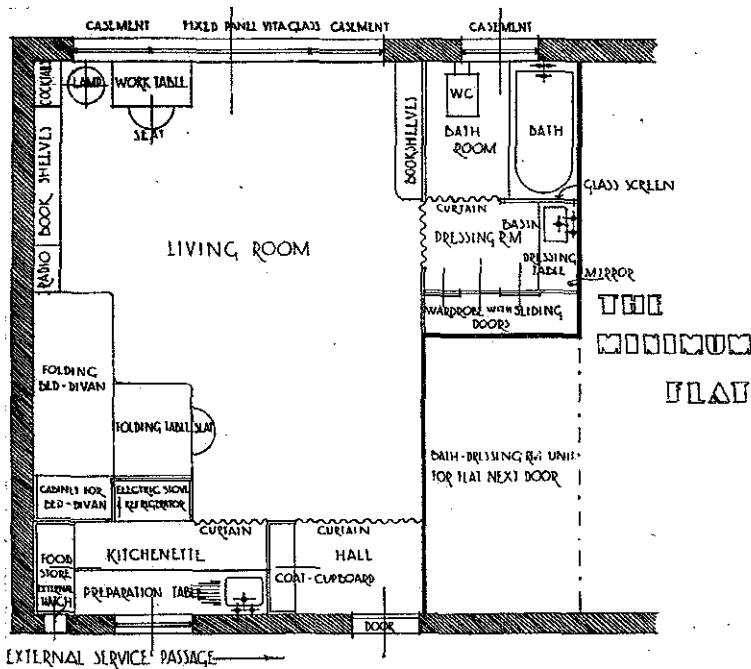


Fig 4 Plan of 'The Minimum Flat', 1933. Drawing by Best Overend. From Best Overend, 'A Minimum Flat with Maximum Comfort', *Australian Home Beautiful*, September 1933, p 29

the 'Exhibition of British Industrial Art in Relation to the Home' was held at Dorland Hall. It was here that Wells Coates's miracle of 'multum in parvo' or compactness without constriction,⁶⁶ his *Minimum Flat*, was exhibited. The July 1933 issue of *Architectural Review* published a photograph of this stylish interior which was also described as a replica of the typical apartment for the block he had designed for Izokon Limited at Lawn Road, Hampstead and which was noted as being under construction. The exhibition mock-up is almost exactly as Best drew it in the *Australian Home Beautiful* except that Overend's flat interlocks with its neighbour rather than butt against it as occurs in the Coates example. Though no record of the English example appears in the Overend drawing collection, it is almost certain that Overend would have been familiar with the exhibition preparations before his departure for Australia in March 1933.

A more definitive source for the Overend drawing however can be found not in the Dorland Hall exhibit, but in the first scheme for the Lawn Road Flats which was completed in November 1932 when Overend was working in Coates's office. Indeed, the brief for the Lawn Road flats was finalised in May 1932,⁶⁷ also at the time when Overend was in that office. The November 1932 plan shows a block of minimal flats and unlike the final Lawn Road plans, a kitchenette is shown next to the front door in exactly the same location as Best Overend's 1933

drawing. This first Lawn Road plan also shows a central stair tower projecting like the prow of a ship from the slab. In the Lawn Road Flats, as they were built from September 1933, this tower had disappeared. In Overend's initial drawings for Cairo, a similar capped stair tower appears, though in the final project this roof also disappeared but the plan of the stair remained.

Cairo Flats

Following Overend's articles in the *Argus* promoting flat development, it seems then no surprise that in December 1935 it was announced in the *Argus*,⁶⁸ that a large block of 40 bachelor flats was to be erected in Nicholson Street, Fitzroy, opposite the Exhibition Gardens (Fig 5). Two kinds of flats were proposed — one with a single main room, the other with separate living and bed rooms. It was also announced that the flat roof would be fitted with plate-glass windscreens and a separate building which would contain a shop and communal dining room with living quarters above for the manager. The garages at the rear were to have two communal laundries on the roof.

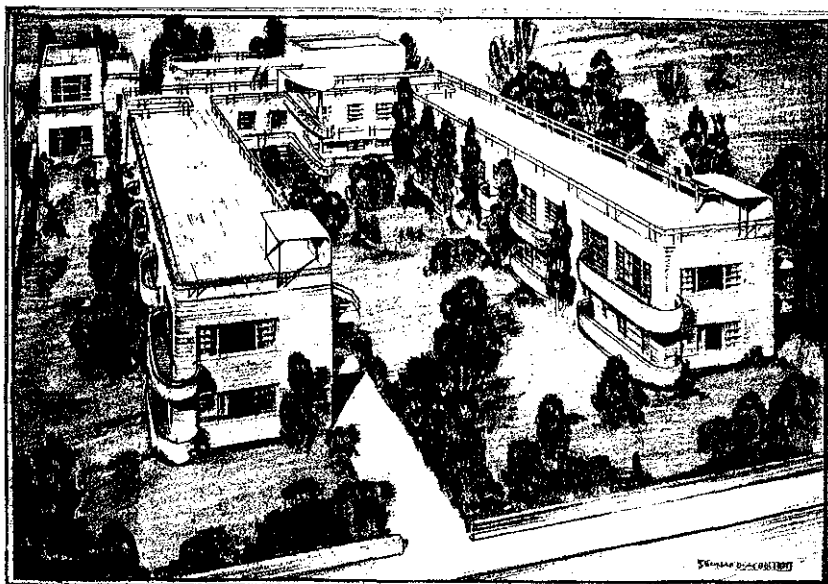


Fig 5 Cairo Flats, Nicholson Street, Fitzroy, 1935-36. Architects, H Vivian Taylor, Soilleux & Overend. Drawing by Leonard A Bullen. From RVIA Journal, July 1936, p 95

The flats were planned as a two-storey U-shaped block about the perimeter of an old garden. The living spaces of the flats on each arm of the U had a northern aspect while those at the base of the U faced east. Cantilevering reinforced concrete access balconies were located on

the south and west walls. On 17 October 1936, *The Herald* described the centre piece of the scheme, an 'unsupported staircase, believed to be unique in the world',⁶⁹ and from which the formwork had just been removed, as a 'young architect's triumph.' Twenty-seven year-old Overend paid tribute in the article to his engineers, Messrs Laing and Mussen for the success of his daring curved cantilevered stair as he had been unable to induce any other engineer to trust his initial idea.

Cairo was completed in December 1936, and there was no difficulty in letting the flats with a rate of 26 shillings per week for the bedsitters, and 36 shillings for the one bedroom flats.⁷⁰ In its completed state, Cairo contained 20 bedsit flats and eight one bedroom units with eight garages provided in a separate building at the rear. Various changes had occurred during the course of construction. The wind and shade shelters on the roof were deleted as were the squash courts and clothes hoists on top of the garages, the caretaker's flat on top of the dining room, handrails to the balconies, as well as the mid-rail of all the stair balustrades. The building was indeed lean in external appearance, worthy of its label of downright functionalism.

Opening off the main living space of each flat with its large Chicago-style window, there was a little projecting sun balcony in yellow cement. Inside, golden buff walls and ceilings were the base colours employed and to give each flat some measure of individuality, highlights within the service spaces and joinery, of pale green, pale citron, oyster grey, cinnamon and champagne were added. Floors were polished timber and there were no cornices, just a curve as the wall and ceiling merged imperceptibly into one surface. There was also ample built-in storage. The kitchenettes had small gas cookers, steel edged sinks, so-called 'hot cupboards' beneath the stove, storage cupboards and a tiny meal alcove with seats for two. The entry hall had a service telephone, the front door a porthole window. Service hatchways and dustbin hatchways (cleared three times weekly) were the time and labour saving features of these diminutive bachelor pads. Light fittings were elegant and evocative of the Bauhaus with their functional simplicity. The aluminium D-handles to the internal doors were possibly the first example of their use in Australia as their design had been pioneered by none other than Wells Coates, Overend's former employer and acknowledged inventor⁷¹ of the D-handle or as he preferred to call it, the bow handle. Like Coates's first handles, the D-handles at Cairo were bent through less than a right angle so that they met the door at an acute angle.

Though it is tempting to draw direct comparisons between the final Lawn Road Flats scheme which was published in 1934, Overend's de-

sign stands as a thoroughly convincing application of the modernist program of minimal dwelling units grouped together in a collective block. In addition, Cairo's U-shaped block of dynamic cantilevering stairs, the elements of pipe handrails, porthole windows to the green front doors, and overburnt red clinker bricks give a textured and reassembled International Style set in a lush garden regardless of its uncompromising rational planning and economy. Though the idea of the bachelor flat in itself was not new in Melbourne, the notion of *existenzminimum* was indeed innovative. In April 1937, these extremely well appointed flats were described as introducing to Melbourne, 'a new solution of the problem of combining what are so often incompatibles — space-economy, comfort, absolute modernity, and minimum rentals' with 'an array of luxury features normally seen only in a more ambitious setting than a bachelor apartment.'⁷² From the roof of Cairo and within its protected garden, it would appear that his prophecy of apartment buildings set in verdant parkland of exactly two years earlier might actually have been realised and posit a realistic model for the future.

Overseas Again

Not content with having produced one of Australia's landmarks of modern architecture, and having recently collaborated with his cousin Robert Eggleston at the 1936 Ideal Home and Building Exhibition⁷³ on the design of the 'Living Garden' with its very own fern gully, Best Overend, now 28 years old, was restless. He resigned from the partnership.

On the 13th March 1937, Best Overend left Sydney as Third Officer on the steamship 'Karoo' bound for Osaka in Japan. The ship was diverted to Shanghai and it was there that Best worked for the English firm of architects and developers, Lester Johnson and Morris. His main task was the design and documentation of a new skyscraper for the giant Japanese shipping company NYK on the Bund in Shanghai.⁷⁴ This striking Mendelsohnian tower of 30 storeys was never built but its scale and shape give some indication of the vivid imagination of the young Australian architect let loose on a larger commission. Of the 400 flats which were to occupy the upper twenty storeys, Overend was to note that the 'projecting parabolic planes to the front facade are to be enclosed sunrooms glassed in, with a rather magnificent view up and down the Whangpoo and Foochow Rivers.'⁷⁵ As his son Tronn Overend has recorded,⁷⁶ while in Shanghai, Best Overend made several trips to Japan and stayed in Frank Lloyd Wright's Imperial Hotel which he was blithely to describe as 'one of the loveliest buildings in the world.'⁷⁷

