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Torbreck: Projections of Mid-twentieth Century Californian Landscape

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Abstract

Queensland architect Robert Froud cited émigré Austrian architect Karl Langer who taught him at The University of Queensland as particularly significant to the formulation of his thinking about architecture. Karl Langer’s first appointment was to teach the Garden Design subject in 1940. His archive reveals an ongoing interest in Californian landscape ideas and includes a type-copied version of Californian landscape architect Garrett Eckbo’s book Landscape for Living. Torbreck, an apartment complex on Dornoch Terrace in Highgate Hill, an inner-city suburb three kilometres south of the city centre of Brisbane, was a speculative project designed by Aubrey H. Job and R. P. Froud (Job & Froud) in 1957 and finally completed in 1961. It conflated the point block and linear block of Le Corbusier’s Plan Voisin (1925), bringing them into close proximity. It represented a radical departure from the walk-up block of flats typical of Brisbane during the inter-war years that had been the normative multi-residential type. Conceived as a city within the city the ground floor was planned as an arcade of shops, restaurants, lounges and offices. Although indebted to the architect Le Corbusier and specific projects such as the Antonio Ceppas Building by Jorge Machado Moreira with Roberto Burle Marx in Rio de Janeiro and The Lawn point block, Harlow by Sir Frederick Gibberd in England, the drawings produced to market the scheme reveal an overarching engagement with mid-twentieth-century Californian landscape and lifestyle ideas reflecting a broad interest in the equivalence given to landscape and architecture in Californian projects within the architectural culture of Brisbane in the forties and fifties.

A range of evidence points to a developing interest by Queensland architects in the potential for an equivalence between architecture and landscape from 1940. This interest was driven in part by émigré Austrian architect Karl Langer who started
teaching at the University of Queensland that year and by the absence of a local landscape design profession. The work of Californian architect William Wurster and the outcomes of his close collaboration with landscape architect Thomas Church were influential in Australasia generally but particularly in southeast Queensland as were the writings of Californian landscape architect Garrett Eckbo that first appeared in the American journal *Pencil Points* at the end of the 1930s. These influences amongst others facilitated the local reception of Californian architecture and landscape ideas. Post-war it was sustained and broadened to reflect the interest in Brazilian architecture generated by the exhibition *Brazil Builds* at MoMA in 1943, Le Corbusier’s continued integration of architecture and landscape as well as landscape developments in the United Kingdom and Scandinavia. In a significant post-war shift it became bound up with an idealisation of American lifestyle with a particular focus on West Coast beach culture. This shift informed a range of large-scale projects undertaken in the 1950s by Job & Froud (Figure 1), Karl Langer (Figure 14) and James Birrell (Figure 15) in southeast Queensland.

Figure 1 Aerial photo of Torbreck (Audrey H. Job & R. P. Froud, 1961), 26 November 1960. Photographer unknown, image courtesy: State Library of Queensland.

Torbreck, an apartment complex designed by Job & Froud represents a significant outcome of this trajectory. Aubrey Job and Robert Froud began their collaboration in 1954. Froud, the younger of the two first enrolled in the Diploma Course at the Queensland Technical College in 1937. In 1941 he enrolled in the composite six-year diploma course and continued his studies under Professor Robert Cummings at the University of Queensland. Here he was also taught by Dr Karl Langer initially appointed to teach the Garden Design subject. Robert Froud particularly singled out
the work of Californian architect William Wurster and Langer’s emphasis on the idea of the house as a ‘microcosm’ and ‘garden as microclimate’ as influential in shaping his thinking about architecture.¹ In his ‘Sub-tropical Housing’ paper published in 1944, Langer advocated the idea of using ‘the whole allotment as a single unified living-area’, that recalls the claims made by RM Schindler about his own house.

Torbreck is located on Dornoch Terrace in Highgate Hill, three kilometres south of the city centre in Brisbane. It was designed in 1957 as a home-unit block and completed early in 1961.² Still in use today, it was conceived as a ‘mixed use’ development with an arcade of shops, restaurants, lounges and offices addressing Dornoch Terrace combined with 150 dwellings ranging from bedsits, one and two-bedroom units and penthouses in the one project. It represented a radical departure from the standard multi-residential type of ‘walk-up’ block of flats typical in Brisbane during the interwar years. Calling the project a ‘home-unit block’ was a strategic distinction made by the architects to frame an argument for a reworking of restrictive fire-egress regulations to allow the construction of this new housing type. It also necessitated a relaxation of the 12-storey height limit set in local building regulations. It was a speculative project. Given that prior to the Torbreck commission, Job & Froud had only been responsible for detached houses, it is remarkable that they were able to respond to the radical shift in scale to design and oversee the construction of a project involving such a level of complexity and innovation. It was named after the gabled timber cottage on Dornoch Terrace it replaced. The architects imagined it as a small city within the city – embedded within a suburb of detached timber houses strung out along the ridgeline. Its location marking the top of the highest hill adjacent to Brisbane’s city centre brings to mind Bruno Taut’s visionary and utopian conception of Die Stadtkrone.³ It was contemporaneous with the Romeo und Julia Hochhausgruppe in Stuttgart designed by Hans Scharoun (1954-59) and Interbau or IBA 57 (1957) in Berlin. Interbau, given coverage in Architecture and Arts in November 1957, captured in one city quarter a range of approaches to housing being tested internationally, from the four detached urban houses designed by Arne Jacobson to variations of linear and point apartment blocks in a Corbusian park-like setting.⁴ With its Garden Block positioned below the Tower Block on a steep site generating an L-figure in plan and section, Torbreck conflates two of these approaches: the point block and the linear block derived from Le Corbusier’s Plan Voisin (1925) as separate but adjacent forms brought into close proximity (Figure 2).
Figure 2 Torbreck from the north-east. Drawings: Fryer Library Collection, University of Queensland, Torbreck plans UQF426.

An article in Brisbane’s newspaper, The Courier Mail, in October 1957 headlined ‘Scheme for 110 flats: £750,000 block of “home units”’, and depicted Torbreck in a park-like setting erasing all other adjacent detached timber houses. In the article Rowley Pym, who initiated the project on the site of his grandmother’s cottage on Dornoch Terrace, claimed that owning a unit would be cheaper than owning a house. Units are estimated as costing from £3000 for the cheapest bedsit in the Garden Block to £10,000 in the Tower. Advantages of the scheme are listed as: shared overhead maintenance costs for rates, cleaning, hot water and gardening; the sharing of one television aerial; and the use of shared facilities, such as the rooftop observation tower, roof garden, swimming pool, bowling green, tennis court and children’s playground. There would even be special arrangements for children to be able to keep their pets. The developers were clearly anxious to attract family buyers.

Figure 3 Plans of ground floor plan and tower. Drawings: Fryer Library Collection, University of Queensland, Torbreck plans UQF426.
The drawings produced to market the project give the clearest insight into the breadth of its imagined scope. The plan of the ground-floor level (Figure 3) that connects the two blocks shows a transparent chemist shop addressing the street adjacent to the foyer of the main entrance (which was tiled in an abstract grey, yellow and green pattern when built) off Dornoch Terrace (Figure 4). It is separated from a square plan form housing a shop, beauty salon, delicatessen, frock salon, surgery and Torbreck’s management office. A central elevator core, toilets, and a resident’s lounge and terrace in the north-facing corner complete the square (Figure 5). The lounge has access to a Lounge Terrace located on the northeast corner of the Tower Block.

**Figure 4** Main entrance. Drawing: Fryer Library Collection, University of Queensland, Torbreck plans UQF426.

**Figure 5** Ground floor lounge and terrace. Drawing: Fryer Library Collection, University of Queensland, Torbreck plans UQF426.
The vestibule through the centre of this space ends in a smaller rectilinear plan form devoted to a restaurant with an adjacent roofed terrace embedded between the five penthouses on the top level of the Garden Block. These penthouses effectively replace the roof garden promised in *The Courier Mail* article. This ground-floor arcade of shops and other facilities – between the columns supporting the units in the tower above – is shown as relatively transparent. It acts as a programmatic fulcrum, between the larger units of the tower above, the penthouses of the Garden Block on the same level and smaller more affordable units below (Figure 6).

![Figure 6](image)

*Figure 6* East elevation, part cross-section. Drawing: Fryer Library Collection, University of Queensland, Torbreck plans UQF426.

The Tower Block, rising fifteen stories above the Dornoch Terrace entrance, sits on a plinth of three levels of garage and a level of storage. It provides seven variations in unit layout, ranging in size from 1077 to 1347 square feet (approximately 100 to 125 square metres). Configured along a corridor spine within an elongated cruciform plan figure, it is effectively three towers connected by fire stairs in between. Units in the central tower have balconies to the east and west – to take advantage of the views – shaded by vertical blue ellipsoid sun blades. These balconies are conceived of as gardens. The facades – composed of vertical striated concrete panels adjacent to adjustable sun blades and balcony edges – make a constantly changing abstract pattern due to the inevitable adjustment of the blades and variegated colour of the panels (Figure 7).
In the marketing drawings, ‘unit type T1’ in the Tower Block – a two-bedroom unit to the north with three balconies – features a television on a rotating plinth able to swivel between the Main Bedroom and the Living Room; visible from these rooms and from the Dining Room and Balconies as well. Not only does the drawing project a lifestyle association between modern living and television, a technology first introduced to Australia in 1956, but it also positions this technology as the ‘hearth’ of the modern home (Figure 8).

Other ‘modern’ features listed include: mechanical ventilation to kitchens and bathrooms; built-in wall safes; sliding metal-framed glass doors; spacious ceiling height; built-in wardrobes; ultramodern built-in kitchens, as well as tiled bathrooms,
separate water closets, vanity tables and automatic washers and dryers. The block is crowned by roof gardens and an observation lounge framing a 360-degree panorama of Mount Cootha, surrounding hills and Moreton Bay. The plan of the Roof Top depicts gardens, with a lozenge-shaped raised platform over an amoeboid pool, sitting within the square figure of the central tower (Figure 9). The roof of the smaller square tower to the south then frames two overlapping curved recreational platforms hovering over lawn with gardens at the edges. The northern rectilinear tower has a curved platform intersecting with a smaller curved plinth for a statue floating over a curvilinear lawn, again with gardens making up the edge. These lavish roof gardens – reminiscent of Roberto Burle Marx’s roof garden design for the Ministry of Education and Public Health in Rio de Janeiro (1938) – were never realised probably due to the financial difficulties the project encountered, but would have foregrounded the panoramic views available from the Observation Lounge. As the marketing drawings declare:

![Figure 9 Roof Top, Roof Top Garden and Observation Lounge. Drawings: Fryer Library Collection, University of Queensland, Torbreck plans UQF426.](image)

**Figure 9** Roof Top, Roof Top Garden and Observation Lounge. Drawings: Fryer Library Collection, University of Queensland, Torbreck plans UQF426.

*Torbreck Home Unit* owners can take pride in their exclusive ownership of a roof garden of a kind unrivalled anywhere in Australia. The all glass observation lounge commands a full circle panoramic view of the city, river, mountains, Moreton Bay and coastline. Truly the crowning glory of *Torbreck*. A new concept in gracious living.⁶

The general schema for the Tower Block is reminiscent of the Antonio Ceppas Building (1952) designed by Jorge Machado Moreira on a residential street in Rio de Janeiro. This scheme featured in the *Architectural Review* in 1956.⁷ Moreira had
worked on the Ministry of Education Building in Rio de Janeiro (1937-43) with architects Oscar Niemeyer and Lucio Costa with Le Corbusier acting as a consultant. The Antonio Ceppas Building was an eight-storey, square, reinforced concrete framed structure founded on a steep slope with a basement garage and central lift. It featured vertical and horizontal ventilation louvres with trellis and screens over balconies within the form; these combined to orchestrate a brise-soleil in one plane and also framed views. It was clad in artificial stone and fair-face brick. An undercroft supported by piloti featured a landscape designed by Roberto Burle Marx with paths of white, red and black Portuguese stone. Marx also designed tiles for the external facing of a wall in the undercroft and a glass mosaic mural. The Tower Block is an elaboration of this idea but configured as three connected towers. The elevation facing Dornoch Terrace is splayed like The Lawn point block in Harlow, designed by Frederick Gibberd a model of which was shown at CIAM 7 in 1949.8

Torbreck’s Garden Block is eight stories high in a tripartite composition with one penthouse level, six levels of home units and garages housed in the undercroft at ground level. For this block the architects configured eight plan variations ranging from 585 square feet (54 square metres) bedsits up to 900 square feet (84 square metres) penthouses, all with access balconies to the south and balconies off bedrooms (in the larger units) and living spaces to the north to facilitate cross ventilation. The run of penthouses at roof level is broken off-centre in front of the Tower Block by the restaurant terrace, which frames a view back to the city and enlivens the elevation overlooking the garden. Flower boxes integrated into the balustrade of the northern balconies and light blue spandrel panels in the aluminium-framed window system added further visual interest. The system is arranged in a hopscotch pattern at the centre of the block and also bookends the composition. This patterning, also typical of a number of Interbau projects in Berlin, serves to break up the form by drawing attention to the variation of individual units. The uniform use of roller blinds (on springs tensioned against wind loads) that could be set in a range of retractable positions adds another level of patterning to this facade. The architects had envisioned that the northern elevations of Torbreck would be enveloped in cascading bougainvillea; had it been realised, this would have produced a remarkable excess of colour obfuscating the form.9 The themed chequerboard coloured paving of the access balconies serves to differentiate levels. Access balconies also feature downpipes disguised as posts as part of a sophisticated drainage detailing.
The Courier Mail’s depiction did not indicate roof gardens. They were added after the article and prior to the finalisation of the marketing drawings. There is a tennis court next to the Garden Block in The Courier Mail representation but no apparent provision for car parking. A proposed bowling green mentioned in the article is not shown. The Main Garden Layout drawing from the marketing set replaces the tennis courts with a swimming pool surrounded by palms and a rockery with adjacent dressing pavilion (Figure 10). The garden is now bisected by a driveway leading to a turning circle tucked into the undercroft where undercover parking for nine cars is provided. A path leads through a rock garden grotto under the Tower Block to the elevator. On the other side of the driveway opposite the pool is a lawn with a putting green, children’s playgrounds and gardens. Visitor parking for nine cars is arrayed as angle parking along an access road to Chermside Street at the rear of the site.

![Figure 10 Main Garden layout. Drawing: Fryer Library Collection, University of Queensland, Torbreck plans UQF426.](image)

The idea of kidney shape pool with adjacent pavilion is remarkably similar to the image of an unnamed project by Californian landscape architects Eckbo Royston and Williams published in Architectural Record in 1957, alongside a short commentary on the exhibition Landscape Architecture Today which opened in San Francisco in 1956 and subsequently toured the United States. This domestic project themed around curvilinear forms featured a kidney-shaped pool and rock garden, pool pavilion and children’s playground and is typical of Californian landscape ideas that developed after Thomas Church and the Donnell residence garden of 1948. The Koolish Residence in Bel Air, California is a landscape project by Garrett Eckbo that featured a kidney-shaped pool but no pavilion or lanai (Figure 11).
The significant addition to *The Courier Mail* version in the Torbreck garden as depicted in the marketing drawings is the driveway and turning circle. The perspective produced of the Swimming Pool and Gardens looking out from the dressing pavilion adjacent to the Garden Block depicting stylish bathers around the pool edged by palms, represents most clearly the Californian – Gold Coast holiday lifestyle atmosphere (Figure 12). Torbreck was in fact discussed as a prototype that might have been repeated at the Gold Coast had the developers not run into financial difficulty.

*Figure 11* Koolish Residence, Bel Air, California (Garrett Eckbo 1950-1956). Photographer unknown Image courtesy: Environmental Design Archive, UC Berkeley.

*Figure 12* Swimming Pool and Gardens. Drawing: Fryer Library Collection, University of Queensland, Torbreck plans UQF426.
Although their vision was never fully realised, Job & Froud remembered the lessons learnt in their houses when imagining outdoor spaces on the ground and in the air, projecting domestic Californian garden ideas onto the ground plane of Torbreck. This use of a domestic idea for outdoor living frames their conception of an ‘ultramodern’ lifestyle. Every level of the project displays a knowing familiarity with international precedents, available at the time through the circulation of postwar architecture journals and reveals the sophistication of the local architectural culture. What makes the project of particular interest is the super-adjacency of two radically different multiresidential types – tower and linear block – and the attempted resolution of resulting tensions internally and in relation to the scale of the suburb (Figure 13).

A good example of this is the narrow resultant slot between the Tower and Garden blocks. One aspect of the project that could have been problematic – the rear of the tower podium – is articulated by a sophisticated articulation of the brick skin through courses of uniformly patterned brick, as you might expect in a domestic project but at a monumental scale. It also reveals the significant influence of Karl Langer who taught at The University of Queensland and later at QIT in a part-time capacity for nearly thirty years. As discussed, Robert Froud cites Karl Langer’s emphasis on the garden as microclimate as particularly significant to his own thinking. This focus on the garden can be traced to the writing and illustrations of Californian landscape architect Garrett Eckbo, in particular his book *Landscape for Living* which Langer had type copied and which directly informed the lectures he delivered through the 1950s and 1960s. Perhaps in Garrett Eckbo’s account of Brazilian architecture and landscape architecture, in his description of curves reminiscent of Torbreck’s unrealised roof top...
garden and colours suggestive of the architects unrealised vision of a monumental cascading garden of bougainvillea to obfuscate the form do we come closest to the overall landscape intention of Torbreck:

Today in tropical Brazil a school of modern architects and garden designers, the latter led by Roberto Burle Marx, have produced vital, vigorous and widely heralded cultural developments. Burle Marx, a horticulturist and plant explorer as well as able designer, with his plant forms of flamboyant yet precise curves, and their development in the pinks and purples of real tropical foliage, is expressing both the great wealthy pushing of nature in regions where growth must be controlled and repressed….12

Figure 14 Lennon’s Broadbeach Hotel, Gold Coast (Karl Langer, 1956). Photograph: Robin Smith, ca. 1960, Image courtesy: State Library of Queensland.

Figure 15 Centenary Swimming Pools, Spring Hill: close up of raised seats/ponds and wading pool (James Birrell, 1957-1959). Photographer unknown, Image courtesy: Brisbane City Council.
Endnotes

2 Ibid.
3 Bruno Taut, Die Stadtkrone (Jena: Eugen Diedrichs, 1919).
5 ‘Scheme for 110 Flats: £ 750,000 Block of “Home Units”’, The Sunday Mail (27 October, 1957), 6.
6 Quoted from the Figure 8 drawing.
9 Ferguson, op. cit.