

Australian Architecture: Expressionism tendencies in the twentieth century

Ava Clifforth

Australian architects of the twentieth century were bound by a common thread — the search for a national style and identity. During the post-war period, immigration and mass production meant the formation of new communities and aesthetics that represented both a rebellion against conformism and a gateway to pluralism. Strictly defined, pluralism is ‘a condition or system in which two or more states, groups, principles, sources of authority, etc., coexist’.¹ In the context of architecture, pluralism describes the co-existence of styles, of epochs and of aesthetics and perspectives.² For Australian architects Kevin Borland and Edmond and Corrigan, a plural approach was born out of defiance against mainstream Modernism. I will observe how these architects employ Expressionist symbols and ideologies in their designs for educational and civic spaces.

Amidst the devastation of World War I, Expressionists responded to the uncertainties of modern life with angular, colourful depictions of the world as they felt it, rather than it appeared. From 1905 to 1920 German and Austrian artists, poets, writers, performers and architects fostered an international movement designed to reinvigorate visual culture and remedy social institutions. They abandoned stylistic norms and themes of early twentieth century German art, turning to bold experimentations in colour and

symbology.³ The Expressionists used brazen pigments, exaggerated angles, flattened perspectives and distorted scenes to convey deep, enigmatic and introspective emotions. Their grandiose drawings, paintings and plans for cities, buildings and utopias were animated with metaphors for social justice and authenticity.⁴

Architects such as Bruno Taut led the Expressionists on an 'an elemental search for universal rhythms and structural principles', insisting social progress could be provoked by the sublime.⁵ He urged young architects to build with talismanic ideals for the betterment of society. The symbolic resonance of a jewelled urban crown became a declaration against the madness of war and a beacon for the betterment of society.⁶

Like the Expressionists, Marion Mahoney and Walter Burley Griffin imagined plans for an ideal city. They studied architecture during the turn of the century, when America was establishing new political and economic attitudes.⁷ In their hometown of Chicago, a post-war, corporate ideology emerged as a result of centralised capital accumulations. Goods became commodified through mass production, which threatened progressive artists and designers. Corporate institutions that occupied skyscraper offices engendered a culture of bureaucratic conformity above originality. The Griffins were proponents of Louis Sullivan's vision for sociologically informed architecture. They were determined to create buildings that would cultivate 'authentic interaction' and free will in individual citizens.⁸

The Griffins' extensive urban scheme for Australia's capital city Canberra in 1914 was an exercise in the formation and proliferation of an idealised democratic society, perhaps to combat the threat of mainstream corporate conformity they were witnessing in America.⁹ Their vision for the new capitol illustrated a vibrant city, landscaped between Mt. Ainslie and Black Mountain in a template of interconnecting triangles where corridors protrude from the

hexagonal civic centre, branching out to neatly defined government, residential and commercial subcentres. Carefully planned water basins and organic lake forms disrupt the network of inter-connecting nodes, which otherwise buzz with intense geometric patterning.

Public, corporate and cultural institutions in the Canberra plan are sited around parks and boardwalk vistas, encouraging freedom of movement and a cross-pollination of civic experiences. The Griffins rebelled against the urban template of their native Chicago, where corporate enterprise is segregated in culturally homogenous skyscrapers. Rather, central parks and linking cultural institutions would integrate Canberran business and politics into everyday public life. As Walter Griffin asserted, Australia's new capital city was the perfect stage on which to host 'the vanguard of political progress ... setting a standard for the entire world in its struggle against private monopoly and exploitation'.¹⁰ The Griffins' humanist values and political ambition are embedded in the structure, program and spirit of Canberra.

In a view from Mt. Ainslie, avenues converge to emphasise the central triangle where key government functions would take place. Their urban plan echoes Expressionist aims for an architecture of social harmony. Fixed in its democratic conviction, the planned Capitol Building embodies Bruno Taut's Expressionist scheme of a city with critical markers of uniting monuments, which aspired to imbue the individual with a sense of social purpose and collective responsibility. At its apex, the Capitol beams like a secular temple dedicated to the spirit of Australia (Fig. 1). Depicted in Marion Mahony's drawings as a layered pyramid with a large vaulted roof, the Capitol embodies an air of esoteric mysticism. This crystalline castle is imbued with cosmic symbology, humanist values and a radical aesthetic that speaks to the Expressionist spirit.



Figure 1. Marion Mahoney Griffin and Walter Burley Griffin, View from Mt. Ainslie towards Capital Hill and the Capitol Building, 1911-13.

Like Taut, the Griffins drew from mysticism and myth, referencing symbols of deep time and archetypes from nature; 'the cave, the temple, the redoubt'.¹¹ Their unique design for the Capitol Theatre in Melbourne conjures pointed ridges and magnificent coloured glass details that evoke Taut's crystal utopias. Opened in 1924, the Capitol Theatre is tucked like a crystalline rock beneath the façade of a large shopping and entertainment complex on Swanston Street, Capitol House. The theatre proscenium, roof and walls feature detailed fractal plasterwork that extrudes in angular striations in the underground cavity of the main auditorium. Thick, rectangular columns and pure white paint act as neutral hosts to the sublime jagged extrusions.

For the Griffins and the Expressionists, architecture in dialogue with natural forms inspired a dialogue with humanity. Descending levels of rectangular ripples and multicoloured lights in the auditorium roof connote the sacred geometry of Mesoamerican architecture, which was also employed by Frank Lloyd Wright in his Mayan Revivalist Ennis House of 1924.¹² The Capitol Theatre roof also



Figure 2. Bruno Taut, The City Crown, Urban Plan, 1919.

draws formal comparison with Bruno Taut's urban scheme for Die Stadtkrone (Fig. 2). Constructed in the same year, the Capitol Theatre blends Expressionist philosophy and Mayan Revival styles to combine different styles, epochs and perspectives into a single structure. This pluralism was fully realised half a century later in Postmodernism.

Architectural historian Ian McDougal speculates that the Griffins' Expressionist tendencies contributed toward their image as alienated from the masses – 'artists in a land of philistines'.¹³ In Australia, they took on a heroic role as avant-garde architects estranged from the conventions of modernism and local types.¹⁴ In the domestic sphere, the Griffins' compact cave houses with craggy mouldings and low horizontal profiles were rebellious experimentations in form and philosophy, especially compared to their contemporary counterparts.¹⁵ The cost of being outsiders did not elude them, as bureaucratic complications and political complexities interfered with their courageous vision for Canberra and ultimately lost them the job. However, what they discovered in the process — an architecture of polygonal massing, geometric patterning and crystalline motifs — would have a profound impact on Australian architecture. Their Expressionist style was a gateway for the 'multicultural' pluralism that would emerge in the late twentieth century.

The Griffins' crystalline forms and cave type mouldings echo Expressionist affinities with the geological. In the 1950s and 60s these motifs became the basis for entire plans. McDougal asserts the Griffins' courageous clash of colours, textures and expressionist forms inspired other architects. For example, Peter McIntyre's experimental homes seemed to rebel against the stiffness of their NeoGeorgian and Bauhaus counterparts.¹⁶ Emerging from this Expressionist lineage we see architects like the Griffins and McIntyre committed to an authentic understanding of humanity and its dialogue with form. Progressive Modernists experimented with colliding shapes and twisted forms to create vigorous plans embedded with contradicting colours, patterns and an array of architecture.¹⁷ Another such Australian architect is Kevin Borland.¹⁸

According to architectural academic Doug Evans, Borland was widely considered to be 'the primary determinant of the direction of progressive Melbourne architecture' in the 1970s.¹⁹ He was raised in a working-class family with a strong sense of social activism and deep connections to left wing politics and culture. His progressive attitude and humanist concerns foreshadow his alignment with Team 10 architects, who critiqued doctrines of orthodox Modernism in the 1950s and 60s.²⁰ He similarly rejected the 'top-down, big picture elitism' of prominent Modern architects in the pre-war period.²¹

As a former partner of McIntyre, Borland continued the tradition of 'collision' and juxtaposition of forms in his 1975 Clyde Cameron College.²² Designed for Trade Union education and conference. The building is an ad-hoc structure with sci-fi undertones that accommodate various architectural styles in a pluralistic manner.²³ Raw concrete massing extruded in thick cylindrical pipes create walkways that fan across the site in an angular network. Curved cell rooms are plugged in to the intersecting corridors like nodes in a computer circuit. Withdrawn from the city, Clyde Cameron College escapes the commercial urban culture and rebels against programmatic expectations.



Figure 3. Peter Cook, Plug-in City: Come-go Project (City with Existing Technology), 1963.

In plan, the college draws likeness to the same cybernetic diagrams that inspired 1960s avant-garde architecture groups such as Archigram and the Metabolists (Fig. 3), while in elevation, its Lego block mass and off-form finish are undeniably Brutalist. The views are episodic, alluding to the popular imagery of science fiction films or the same kinds of elemental geometry and divine mathematical ratios also occupying the German Expressionists (Fig. 4). Borland evokes the crystalline in glass diamond cut-outs in the walls of tubular corridors and straight windowpanes. Elements of high-tech and space age futurism infuse Borland's college scheme with a forward-thinking edge that challenges conventional understandings of what a school or building should look like.

Like the Expressionists, Kevin Borland asserted the potential of architecture to alleviate social injustice and improve quality of life.²⁴ His radical approach to participatory design for Preshil School in Kew rebels against conventional school programming. In the 1960s and 70s, a wave of pedagogical innovations influenced progressive classroom design.²⁵ Educational philosophers such as Alexander S. Neill asserted that children should have absolute freedom from adult coercion to produce genuine learning. Borland reflects this non-hierarchical approach in his architecture, using rebellious, liberal ideas about children and their use of space and place within society.



Figure 4. View of Clyde Cameron College, 1975 – overlaid with sacred geometry diagram

Nestled in the southern quarter of the site, surrounded by classrooms and play areas is the 1962 School Hall. Designed in collaboration with its young pupils, this theatre and assembly is space shaped like a six-sided pavilion with a pyramidal roof. The roof is a compelling construction of interlocking timber trusses filled with panels of translucent glazing in triangular gaps (Fig. 5). The 'kite-like'²⁶ pattern beckons natural light and alludes to visions of *Glasarchitektur* espoused by the German Expressionists.

Symmetry, pure geometry and community creativity are manifest in the Preshil School Hall. Borland's deliberate simplification of the space encourages the children's own creative re-imagining of its function during performance or assembly time.²⁷ Within the context of the school, this room of congregation and theatrics is a beacon for community gathering. Its latticed roof crowns the structure in glass, leaving a pure and open space for assembly, imagination and expression. The concept of pluralism concedes the co-existence of multiple styles and authorities in one building. In Borland's School Hall, children share equal vision with the architect,

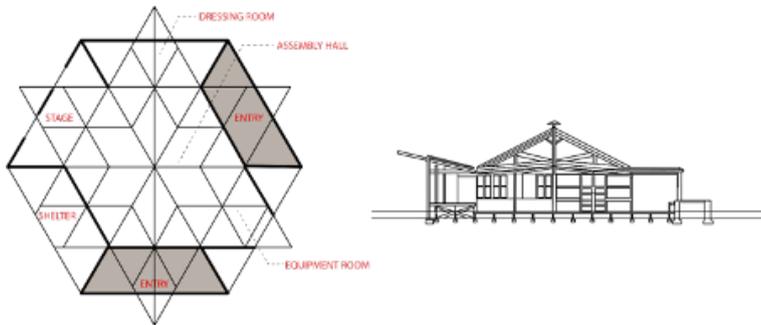


Figure 5. Plan and section of Kevin Borland's, School Hall at Preshil, 1962

resulting in what Taut would call a free place, '... an architecture of the spirit.'²⁸

Pluralism in architecture reflects the complexity of the community that it is designed to serve. In the mid 1970s, Melbourne architects Maggie Edmond and Peter Corrigan contemplated pluralism within the context of Postmodern theory and practice.²⁹ Edmond and Corrigan were local proponents of the international Postmodern movement, which emerged in rebellion to the stark formalities of orthodox modern architecture. In 1966, American architect and theorist Robert Venturi rejected the functionalist axiom and urged for pluralist forms, layered with historical references and double-coded meaning.³⁰ RMIT Building 8 embodies this philosophy. Designed by Edmond and Corrigan in 1993, this multilevel university building sits in stark contrast to its conventional, International Style modern city surroundings. Situated in the heart of Melbourne's CBD on Swanston street, its exterior façade is stacked in a monumental tessellation of coloured mosaic (Fig. 24).

Upon entry, the interior can have a bamboozling effect. Clinical white tiles and circular maze-like corridors can be difficult to navigate. To the initiated inhabitant, secret passages, high ceilings and picturesque angles are bountiful. Its best-kept secret? A large castle rampart-like thoroughfare that slices through the guts of the

building to connect Swanston and Bowen streets, a vital artery in the surge of pre-Covid student rush hours. The 'flowing sequence' of diagonal paths emphasises the episodic narration of space, where smaller, closed rooms sit like solid islands or banks in a river of open space. A comparison between the hexagonal prismatic skylights of Building 8 with Kevin Borland's School Hall roof can also be observed.

From the outside, Building 8 is a geometric wedding cake bolstered by thick columns, exposed pipes and multicoloured bricks of various sizes (Fig. 6). It is studded with a dazzling array of whimsical prisms, gold-framed windows and chamfered edges. Brazen pigments and exaggerated angles reveal Expressionist tendencies. Building 8 is undoubtedly postmodern, a pastiche of multiple influences. On one hand, the distinct tiers and rectangular ornament echo imposing civic monuments in the Neoclassical style. Edmond and Corrigan pass individual elements through a hybrid sieve, mixing in a sprinkle of Italian Memphis Group colour blocking, a shake of Melbourne's iconic 1893 Block Arcade and a dash of Griffin-inspired geometry.

Edmond and Corrigan believed architecture should enhance and define Melbourne's identity, making its 'culture rich and its citizens proud.'³¹ They utilised pluralism to create bold and rebellious formal experimentations, drawing from Expressionist, Neoclassical and local types. Building 8 is a formal acknowledgement of playful Postmodern irony and appropriation in architecture that had already been occurring for decades, albeit on a less obvious scale. The Expressionists, the Griffins, Edmond and Corrigan and Kevin Borland all look back through the canons of architectural history to create culturally specific buildings imbued with civic ambition.

The architects discussed here all see Australia as a locus for new thinking and new ideas. They represent a rebellion against conventions of early Modern planning and design. Their plans for the



Figure 6. Edmond and Corrigan, Building 8, Swanston St Façade, 1993

nation's capital, and of schools and universities employ a variety of styles. Their aesthetics impart the vision of a pluralist, open society that invites and accommodates multiple perspectives. We see this in the work of Borland with his participatory design approach, Edmond and Corrigan with their collage of references and the Griffins' with their democratic underpinning.

At the same time, Expressionist impulses are frequently the product of each architect's unique vision. For example, the Griffins' plan for Canberra and Capitol Theatre refer to Expressionist iconography of Die Stadtkrone, which cultivates democratic spaces that rebel against mainstream capitalist conventions. At its core, Expressionism provides architects with a freedom to defy the rigid palette of traditional Modernism; to explore, interpret and create. Edmond and Corrigan's Building 8 embodies this spirit by remixing architectural codes to manifest a courageous, uniquely Melbournian pluralism.

Endnotes

- 1 'Pluralism'. *Lexico*. <https://www.lexico.com/definition/pluralism>.
- 2 In 1974 Christian Norberg Schulz, in *Meaning in Western Architecture*, said that this pluralism resulted from a post-war

disenchantment with global solutions. After two world wars with failed national outcomes, people were apprehensive toward grand promises from unstable political world leaders. In architectural terms, pluralism signalled a loss of faith in the emergent 'International style' of Modernism.

- 3 Such as Paul Cézanne and Vincent van Gogh.
- 4 'Expressionism'. MoMA New York. https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/themes/expressionism/.
- 5 Written by anarchic German poet Paul Scheerbarth, who was a companion of Taut.
- 6 Bruno Taut: *The City Crown* (1919).
- 7 For the Griffins working under Frank Lloyd Wright, the bourgeois home could be indulged and explored as a work of art and craft.
- 8 James R. Abbott, 'Louis Sullivan, Architectural Modernism, and the Creation of Democratic Space,' *The American Sociologist*, 31, no.1 (2000): 62.
- 9 Weirick, 'The Griffins and Modernism,' 6.
- 10 Weirick, 'The Griffins and Modernism,' 7.
- 11 Weirick, 'The Griffins and Modernism,' 11.
- 12 Janelle Zara, 'How Frank Lloyd Wright's Take on Mayan Temples Shaped Hollywood'. *Artsy*, 27 September 2017, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-frank-lloyd-wrights-mayan-temples-shaped-hollywood>.
- 13 Ian McDougal, 'Speculating on a Traditional Avant-Garde'. *Express Australia*, (1984): 32.
- 14 McDougal, 'Speculating on a Traditional Avant-Garde', 32.
- 15 Neo-Georgian or Free Styles popular at the time.
- 16 McDougal, 'Speculating on a Traditional Avant-Garde', 32.
- 17 Peter McIntyre called this method 'Emotional Functionalism'.
- 18 Kevin Borland was 'a leading proponent' of regional modernism who a great deal of success by the 1970s for his creative and personal style of residential and institutional works.
- 19 Douglas Evans, 'The Changing of the Guard: Social and cultural reflection of 'Community' in 1970s Melbourne Architecture', *Proceedings of SAHANZ Conference 'Contested Terrains'*, 7 (2006).
- 20 Team 10 are an assembly of European architects born out of the International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM).
- 21 Evans, 'The Changing of the Guard', 7.
- 22 McDougal, 'Speculating on a Traditional Avant-Garde', 32.

- 23 Rory Spence, 'Trade Union College, Wodonga,' *The Architectural Review* (London), no. 178 (1985): 81.
- 24 Doug Evans, 'Passion, People and Place: Architecture of Kevin Borland,' in *Kevin Borland: Architecture from the Heart*, edited by Doug Evans, Huan Borland and Conrad Hamann. RMIT Publishing Press, (2006), 28.
- 25 Ben Cleveland and Ken Woodman, 'Learning from Past Experiences: School Building Design in the 1970s and Today'. *TAKE 8 Learning Spaces: The Transformation of Educational Spaces for the 21st Century*, no. 1 (2009), 58–67.
- 26 Phillip Goad, 'Post-War and Polygonal'. *Architectural Theory Review* 2, no. 15 (2010): 166–186.
- 27 Borland describes their crafting of wings out of hessian, proscenium curtains from dyed and painted fabrics, scenery panels that rotated with tracks and platforms constructed with ladders, trestles and wooden sheets.
- 28 Bruno Taut: *The City Crown* (1919).
- 29 Evans, 'The Changing of the Guard,' 1.
- 30 Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966), 118.
- 31 Ian McDougall and Peter Corrigan, 'Sunshine on the Valiant (The A. S. Hook Address delivered at Storey Hall, RMIT, on 29 Aug 2003 by Peter Corrigan and a tribute to Corrigan by Ian McDougall)'. *Architecture Australia* 92, no. 6 (2003): 86.

About the author

Ava Clifforth is a multidisciplinary artist and writer who questions the relationship between architecture, digital technology and biology. Her digital world-building, painting and sculpture trace the boundaries between our socio-cultural landscape and inner worlds. Her architectural designs are augmented by 3D graphics and animation which have featured at National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne Design Week. Her current research examines digital architecture and speculative fiction.