Frederick Romberg: an architectural survey

Since its beginning the RMIT Design Archives has actively sought methods of engaging contemporary design practitioners in contributing to its innovative approaches to collecting and research.

The Romberg Collection, deposited in 2008, documents the practice of eminent Melbourne architect Frederick Romberg. It has been over ten years since the first and last exposition on Romberg’s output was held at RMIT Gallery. That exhibition and subsequent publication, *Frederick Romberg: The Architecture of Migration 1936–1975*, continue to serve as the most complete public record of his work to date.

*Frederick Romberg: an architectural survey* is a collaborative interdisciplinary project that has approached the Romberg Collection with the intention of examining not only his architectural output, but the many ways in which the collection might be seen to work and have implications for contemporary discourse on design. It has sought from the nuances of a collection - the frayed edges, the insistent folds – an active archive.

Four pieces from the collection form the focus of the Romberg project: a poignant tin box that contains Romberg’s student portfolio which he brought with him on his journey to Australia; a presentation photograph album of his early work; a red cloth album documenting a return journey to Europe; and a large green scrapbook that collages the work from Romberg’s career and clearly exhibits the hand of the architect in its creation.

One outcome of the project, this special issue of the *RMIT Design Archives Journal*, is presented as a collection of posters that can be read together or separately. It does not draw conclusions; it simply implies that the messy resolve of a life can be brought together on one page. Essays drawn from Romberg’s own account of his life and work and his travel scholarship paper, ‘Australian Journey 1938’, address his early life as an architecture student in Zurich, his passage to Australia from Europe, early architectural practice in Melbourne, and, an impression of his home here. The essays are accompanied by detailed three-dimensional examinations of selected buildings.

The second output of ‘Frederick Romberg: an architectural survey’ is a film by Keith Deverell who has also sought the framework for his project from among the printed material, scrapbooks, photograph albums, correspondence, plans, office records and personal papers that form the Romberg Collection. The artefacts produced by the project will in turn be brought into the RMIT Design Archives, constituting a collection within a collection. This collaboration will serve as evidence of the extraordinary life of an archive.

**Project members:**
Kaye Ashton: project management
Stephen Banham: graphic identity
Keith Deverell: film
Harriet Edquist: architectural historian
Michael Spooner: architectural visualisation and essays
Letô Melanie Tsolakis: architectural visualisation

Michael Spooner, guest editor
Top Left: View through porthole of Romberg’s cabin aboard the Mosel.

Middle Left: The good ship Mosel, Norddeutscher Lloyd, Bremen, 1938.

Bottom Left: Unlike his master, the captain’s dog, Fix, was friends with all passengers, be they Dr Stratmann or Herr Rubensohn.

Top Right: The passengers of the Mosel. (From left to right, standing) Mr Hamburger, Mrs & Mr Lieblich, Miss Graetz, Miss Roehricht, Mr Falkenstein, Mr Rubensohn, Dr Stratmann, Mrs & Miss Falkenstein, Mr Reiss. (From left to right, on deckchairs) Frederick Romberg, Schnucki Lieblich, Mr & Mrs Amholte, Mrs Rubensohn, Mrs Reiss. Romberg took this photo with a self-release on his Leica camera.

Middle and bottom Right: Deck tennis contestants: Schnucki Lieblich, Herr Hamburger, Frederick Romberg and Dr Stratmann.
Stormy and cold in the Southern Hemisphere.

Top Left: Spencer Gulf, South Australia, September 1938.

Bottom Left: Schnucki Lieblich and Herr Hamburger inspecting the lead smelter at Port Pirie, South Australia, September 1938.

Top Right: On the wharf at Port Pirie. Schnucki Lieblich is about to set foot on Australian soil. September 1938.

Left: Beauty treatment administered by Herr Riess for Dr Stratmann who is about to rejoin his family in Adelaide, 1938.

Right: The captain of the Mosel addressing ship’s company at the ‘Crossing of the Line’ ceremony.

Left: Deck tennis contestants: Schnucki Lieblich, Herr Hamburger, Frederick Romberg and Dr Stratmann.

Above: Frederick Romberg, pencil sketch of Else Riebeling, 1934.

Right: Johanna, Else & Dr Hans Riebeling, Harburg, 1946.
This page: Compilation of objects from the Romberg Collection at the RMIT Design Archives including Romberg’s thesis design for the Dolder Grand Hotel, final year project at ETH-Zurich, 1937; site plan; photographs of models.

Above left: Professor Otto Salvisberg on tour with his students in England in 1938, sporting a student’s pet mouse on his head.

Above right: Frederick Romberg as a student at ETH-Zurich.
In 1931, on completion of his matriculation from the Staatliches Real-Gymnasium in Heidelberg, Germany, eighteen-year-old Frederick Romberg began residing in Basel. He attended classes in the evening and studied at the University of Geneva. After the first year, he admitted that he had made little progress academically. Subsequently, he transferred to the University of Munich where he continued his studies. In contrast to the general and well-trained student life he endured in Munich, Romberg encountered an atmosphere of mounting political violence which saw the first public demonstrations against Jewish professors, and the presence of Brownshirts. In response Romberg took up with a number of leftist opposition groups and for this reason became known to the police.

As the Nazi Party established itself as the political force in Munich, Romberg relocated himself and moved his studies to the University of Kiel, where the relative tranquility enabled him to focus on his studies rather than politics. However, increasing political turmoil eventually compelled Romberg to make his way to Berlin, where visits to the opera, theatre, concerts and cabaret contrasted with the deteriorating social, economic and political conditions of Weimar Germany.

From Berlin, Romberg returned to Kiel determined to finish his law studies. However, he could not distance himself too long from the political situation in Germany, the University requiring him to declare his Anti-Fascist activities to the authorities. At the end of his second semester he returned to Berlin as he felt that the University's disciplinary commission was too lenient for the law student who had attended meetings of the anti-Fascist student movement, and who was a supporter of the League for Cultural Freedom, and who would continue his activism in the city.

At the University of Munich, Romberg was told to transfer to the University of Munich, and where he continued with his law studies. In 1932, at the completion of the second year, Romberg transferred to the University of Munich, and here he joined the local motor cycle club, and was a member of the local Social Democratic Party. At the least the organisation enabled him to continue his activism with motorbikes. He had heard of the decrease in politically active friends, and feared that the charges may be prepared against him by which he could be detained in a labour camp.

A return to Germany was out of the question. He was still in love with the country of his birth and he feared that the charges may be prepared against him. He therefore decided to return to Germany where he and his friends continued to take part in political activities.

In 1938 Romberg faced the challenge of completing his thesis project. Even then, such an undertaking was characterised by long and arduous working hours during which periods his appearance was prone to become unkept and he would dress in tattered clothing. As he recalled: ‘I used to arrange with my landlady to have a pint of cream delivered every day, which I would mix with Chambord and a dash of cherry liquor – not bad actually and quite adequate for temporary austerity.’

Romberg’s final Diploma project, a hotel complex, was located on a hill overlooking Lake Zurich, and was to replace the existing Dolder Grand Hotel.

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Romberg’s final Diploma project, a hotel complex, was located on a hill overlooking Lake Zurich, and was to replace the existing Dolder Grand Hotel. In the proposal the main block swept along the edge of a flatter area of hotel and serviced apartments, a restaurant, stage and cylindrical dance hall. Three additional blocks of apartments with café and courtyard were lined down the slope beneath the main compartment, and were serviced from the main building by a series of underground cable cars. Ironically, where Romberg’s thesis was only a proposal, a fellow graduate would become the architect for additions to the original 1919 Hotel some years later.

In 1948, Romberg stayed at the Dolder Grand Hotel on a visit to Europe with his second wife, Diane, and young sons, Jason. He recounts that he was able to show Diane a secret stair to aDRINKS AND VISUALISATIONS BY MICHAEL SPOONER

As a student Romberg was invited to a supported through funding via the Australian Government’s Your Community Heritage Program.

FREDERICK ROMBERG, THESIS PROJECT, ETH-Z. DOLDER GRAND HOTEL, ZURICH, 1938 (UNBUILT) Drawings and visualisations by Michael Spooner
Otto Salvisberg, Administration Offices Entry Plan, Hoffman-La Roche & Co. AG, Basel, 1939

After five weeks at sea Romberg’s first experience of Australia was a stroll through the small town of Port Pirie which was permanently bathed in the sulphurous gases exuding from the lead works surrounding its harbour. As foreigners in a foreign land, Romberg’s breeches, the latest in European fashion, drew some astonishment looks from the locals, while his fellow passengers were amazed at the abundance of tropical fruit available in the local store. Home however was never far from their minds as the passengers were reporting the growing tension around the occupation of the former Czechoslovakia by German armed forces.

A tour of the harbour and lead works gave the passengers insights into what Australia held in store; what Romberg described as a common attitude: ‘Everything in Australia is best, biggest or most beautiful in the world; or at least the southernmost’. 1

On 25 September 1938 the Mosaic arrived in Adelaide, where Romberg was met by Dr Stratmann, a fellow passenger who had disembarked at Port Pirie. An Australian, Stratmann’s father had emigrated from Germany in some fifty years before. They took in the view of Adelaide from a nearby hill where Romberg remarked ‘I noticed the endless lines of straight roads. Obviously the city had been designed on the plan for which the city was hit by heavy swells and icy winds. Although passengers stayed calm, singing ‘I’m not afraid’ which Romberg states adamantly: ‘I was determined to see Australia and I would only speak English. In his memoirs, Romberg states unambiguously, ‘I determined that the switch to our new homeland should be complete’. 2 Hence none of their children learnt German.

The use of the imperial measurement system and unfamiliarity with the Australian construction industry were also early impediments, but encouraged by the firm and the social contact among his peers, he quickly mastered the new environment.

Impressed by the confidence of his portfolio, Stephenson and Turner made Romberg Job Captain for the Australian Pavilion at the 1939 New Zealand Centennial Exhibition at Rongotai on the Wellington waterfront. While the overall design was evidently by Stephenson, Romberg’s contribution drew on his earlier work in the practice with which they furnished their first flat in Best and Cowens’ 25 Creekwoods apartments on Nicholson Street, opposite Carlton Gardens.

Although Romberg had some experience in practice, he was at a disadvantage when it came to his command of English, but had nonetheless decided from the beginning that both Verena and he would only speak English. In his memoirs, Romberg states unambiguously, ‘I determined that the switch to our new homeland should be complete’. Hence none of their children learnt German.

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Romberg’s work on the Australian Pavilion also earned the appreciation of Stephenson, who, on observing the construction of the main staircases in Wellington wrote to him, ‘The staircases will look fine, and you were quite right in insisting that there should be no landing in its height’. Romberg was offered a raise, and in appreciation he offered an introduction to Otto Salisberg when Stephenson was next in Europe. Within six months of arriving in Australia Romberg had begun to make his mark on its architecture.
FREDERICK ROMBERG, PRESENTATION ALBUM
1939–1953

Bottom:
Frederick Romberg
Hilstan Flats
Brighton
1939 (demolished)

Top:
Romberg and Shaw
Glenunga Flats
Armadale, 1940

Middle Left:
Romberg and Shaw
Newburn Flats
Melbourne, 1939

Middle Right:
Frederick Romberg
Stanhill Flats
Melbourne
1943–1950

Bottom Right:
Frederick Romberg
Hilmar Flats
Brighton
1946 (demolished)
In 1940 Romberg began a partnership with Richard Hocking, a fellow employee at Stephenson and Turner, while still employed by the firm, a combined strain which made the partnership shortlived. Subsequently, Romberg left the practice and began a partnership with May Turner Shaw who had recently joined Stephenson and Turner after a stint overseas. This partnership lasted a year before Romberg established a solo practice.

He continued in solo practice until 1953, by which time joining forces with others was essential if he were to remain in operation. By then he had a record of work to his name and was in a position to choose partners who shared his architectural enthusiasms. The resulting enterprise with Roy Grounds and Robin Boyd, referred to as 'Grandboyd' endured until 1962 when Grounds left the practice to continue work on the National Gallery of Victoria. Romberg and Boyd remained in practice together until Boyd's sudden death in 1971.

Romberg's architectural output up to 1953 is notable for the number and quality of the multi-residential projects he proposed and completed in Melbourne.

Designed in 1939, Newburn Flats, Melbourne, was undertaken in part during his partnership with Shaw and was possible due to a sizeable financial wedding present from Verena's father, Dr Oscar Sulzer. This enabled Romberg to buy a mansion on Queens Road, with the intention to demolish the house to build apartments. This project began on Queens Road, with the intention to demolish the mansion had been named. The construction of Newburn, was an adaption of Newburgh, an English mansion and launched his reputation as an independent architect. Newburn was completed by early 1941.

When Paris fell to the Germans in 1940 they were found themselves in a quandary. Romberg's prized Leica camera with which he had documented his boat journey to Australia, their radio and an old pair of binoculars. As a German document, Romberg was attached to the Deputy Resident Engineer for the Northern Territory. Hudspeth had worked as a structural consultant for a number of jobs undertaken by Stephenson and Turner, including the Australian Pavilion for the New Zealand Centennial. As well, he had been engaged by Romberg to consult on the Newburn Flats before his interim. Back at the drafting boards, Romberg was attached to the Deputy Resident Engineer for the Works Superior on a number of projects including the Royal Australian Air Force building at the local aerodrome. On one occasion he was invited by the chaplain, who knew Romberg, modest output of work in Melbourne, to present a lecture on architecture which was well attended by soldiers and public alike. After the discovery of a theft of tools from the building site for which he was responsible Romberg found himself transferred to a tent camp near Laramie, south of Wyoming, where he was assigned clerical duties, and rather amusingly found himself responsible for keeping camp time by hanging out the hours with an old railway siren. There Romberg, coincidentally, found himself transferred to the Medical Officer on his rounds, reviewing his fascination with the profession that as a student in Europe he had opted for in various dissection and medical presentations.

Following his discharge from the AAC in August 1944, Romberg returned to Melbourne. Still under the edict of the Allied Works Council he began work at the Victorian Public Works Department (PWD), under the supervision of Chief Architect, Percy Everett. In February 1945, three months short of the end of the European conflict Romberg was naturalised as an Australian citizen. He no longer had to report to the police and was free of restrictions that limited his movements nor was he at the mercy of the AWC.

Free of obligations to the PWD, Romberg resumed the Stanhill project with Korman which had been interrupted in 1942. Andy Naumann, a civil engineer and fellow German immigrant, was appointed to take charge of the Stanhill venture on Romberg’s recommendation. Naumann was an engineering graduate trained in Switzerland and Germany and married to a cousin of Verena. Concurrently, Romberg was working on Millet Flats in Brighton for Korman and his brother Hilel (hence Stanhill-Hilstan), which was completed in 1947, but demolished in the 1970s to make way for a road widening that was never to eventuate. It was during this period that Romberg began to engage photographers such as Mark Strick, Wolfgang Seiwes and Herbert Fishwick to document his work. These relationships lasted throughout his career, documented in an album of work, which, together with a large number of photographs and proofs, form a part of the Romberg Collection.
In 1941 Romberg purchased a section of land in Heidelberg, previously part of the Harlands Estate which had been subdivided by the architect Walter Burley Griffin. It was still just a paddock dotted with red gums and a few sparse houses scattered around it, but with views over the Yarra valley. Romberg designed and built two houses one for his family and the other for sale. At this time, it was nearly impossible to obtain tenders for private builds, so he also took on the role of builder, and hired private labour. The family moved in on completion in 1942, and lived there for fifteen years until Verena and Frederick separated in the 1950s. The Romberg House strongly reflects his early architectural training and interest in vernacular German and Swiss rural buildings. The house negotiates the slope of the site by providing an intermediate entrance described by a wall of metal glass panels. The upper floor contains bedrooms and a family bathroom, reached by a narrow, short flight of stairs from the entry foyer. A second, generous flight of stairs directs the visitor down to the lower level that contains the family living and kitchen areas. The stair is notable for its balustrade and newel detailing, clearly reflecting a design in metal, but probably from cost or material scarcity was secretly made from timber. Timber-flooring, filleted wall intersections and door jams along with more than ample natural light describe the interior volumes of the house.

From the living area opens a series of narrow French doors onto a patio partially covered by an exaggerated curved downpipes, and a roughly in a white painted brick, detailed exposed eaves, kitchen area. The stair is notable for its balustrade and newel detailing, clearly reflecting a design in metal, but probably from cost or material scarcity was secretly made from timber. Timber-flooring, filleted wall intersections and door jams along with more than ample natural light describe the interior volumes of the house.

Romberg's development was not an unqualified success. Access to the adjacent properties was difficult, as the houses were completed well in advance of dual road access. Thus, Romberg’s house shared with the adjoining property a narrow driveway, until such time as the future road was implemented by the council. Relations were strained due to the noise of the children of the family next door playing in the driveway and the arrivals and departures of numerous partygoers. A formed road, allowing separate access to the rear property was completed after the War and made sharing of the driveway unnecessary however the neighbors persisted in using it. Ananimities thus simmered until Verena turned a house on the neighbor’s wife, thereafter the driveway remained firmly in the Romberg’s side control. With the end of the War, Romberg headed to Europe in May 1946 with the intention of visiting his parents, and to call upon his father-in-law Dr Sulzer, in the hope of convincing him to provide the financial support for the construction of one hundred residential units at the corner of Spring Street and La Trobe Street in central Melbourne. The site had been bought in 1941 with the backing of Nabium Pty Ltd, the company Romberg had set up during the development of Nabium Flats, with the intention of growing his property development portfolio.

On board the ship to Europe, Romberg’s travel companions included a former Governor of New Zealand attended by aides of high military and naval rank, a former German princess keen to reclaim her title, and war correspondent Alan Moorehead. However, Romberg found himself accommodated with ordinary folk: war brides, journalists and a few academics. During the long journey he became friendly with Israel Porush, Chief Rabbi of Sydney’s Great Synagogue, who at Aden, on the tip of the Arabian Peninsula, had run the military hospital in Harburg but denied any knowledge of the atrocities coming to light despite the Berlin Action, the trial of Nazi war criminals and concentration camp located not far away. Nevertheless, he asked Romberg for a character reference. As a senior army officer, albeit medical, Dr Riebeling was faced with investigation by the occupying British troops, and he was hopeful that a reference from acommonwealth citizen such as Romberg could work in his favour. Nothing came of the investigation.

FREDERICK ROMBERG, ROMBERG HOUSE, HEIDELBERG, 1941 (Built) Drawings by Leto Melanie Tsolakis and Michael Spooner

ENDNOTES

1 Frederick Romberg, ‘Before Gromboyd: an architectural journey from the Australian Government’s Department of Home and Territories to Early Victorian Melbourne’,

The RMIT Design Archives Collection:

Zoe Edquist and Mark Douglass

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