

This page: Completion 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 model.  
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 Stresemann Real-Gymnasium in Harburg, Germany, eighteen year old Frederick Romberg began reading Law 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 law studies. In contrast to the genteel and well-heeled student life in Geneva, in Munich, Romberg encountered an atmosphere of mounting political violence which saw the first public demonstrations against Jewish professors, and the presence of Stormtroopers. 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 remoteness 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 for long from the political situation in Germany, the University requiring him to declare his Aryan origins to re-enrol. To avoid suspicion of leftist sympathies, he joined the local motor auxiliary, an organisation sanctioned by the Nazi Party. At the least the organisation enabled him to continue his fascination with motorbikes.

At the end of the semester he returned to Harburg. Summoned to Munich to appear before the University's disciplinary commission to face scrutiny about his previous political activities when a student there, Romberg fled by train to Zurich. He had heard of the disappearance of politically active friends, and feared that the charges may be a pretext by which he could be detained in a labour camp.

A return to Germany was out of the question and a career in law was limited by the context of foreign practice and thus Romberg was resigned to consider other professional options. During the train trip to Switzerland he committed to becoming an architect and on arrival in Zurich enrolled at the prestigious Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH-Z).

For the next five years after his arrival in Switzerland in 1933 Romberg was surrounded by a flourishing German culture strengthened by émigrés fleeing the rise of Nazism. Here, Romberg was able to indulge cultural activities and even attended book readings by the German author Thomas Mann. Soon after his arrival in Zurich the charges brought against him by the University of Munich were dismissed for lack of evidence and his passport was renewed allowing him to once again enter Germany during breaks in his architecture studies. During one journey Romberg undertook the risk of smuggling marks back into Germany because they could not be exchanged in Switzerland. At the German-Swiss border, his car was examined and he was searched down to his socks. Left standing near naked he exasperatedly asked the attending officer if he should do away with even these items of clothing. Despite this indignity Romberg was eventually released without the money being requisitioned: he had lined his socks with it.

At ETH-Z Romberg's experience of architecture would be shaped by his design tutors. He became friendly with Professor Friedrich Hess who advocated the values of *Heimatsstil*, a movement that encouraged the development of architecture incorporating specific materials and form that reflected the traditional rural character of a particular region. He was further influenced by the charisma and urbane lifestyle of Professor Otto Rudolf Salvisberg, an architect who had been responsible for a number of innovative housing estates in Berlin, and who was to be the designer for the extensive new factories and offices for the pharmaceutical firm, Hoffmann-La Roche in Europe and abroad.

Salvisberg's architecture office was located at ETH-Z where Romberg was placed as an intern for six months. During this time he assisted on the design of the residence of Emil Barel, the Managing Director of La Roche, detailing the wall of windows that mechanically disappeared into the ground at the touch of a button, thus opening the interior of the house onto the garden. This may have been the period when Romberg acquired a copy of the technical drawings which he carried with him to Australia that detailed the grand sweeping staircase of the Hoffman-La Roche administration wing.<sup>1</sup>

In 1938 Romberg faced the challenge of completing his thesis project. Even then, such an undertaking was characterised by long and erratic working hours during which periods his appearance was prone to become unkempt and he cobbled together basic meals. As he recalled: 'I used to arrange with my landlady to have a pint of cream delivered every day, which I could mix with Ovaltine and a dash of cherry liquor – not bad actually and quite adequate for temporary sustenance.'<sup>2</sup>

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 flattened area of hill, and contained serviced apartments, a restaurant, stage and cylindrical dance hall. Three additional blocks of apartments with café and courtyard were tiered down the slope beneath the main compound, 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 1899 Hotel some years later.<sup>3</sup>

In 1968, Romberg stayed at the Dolder Grand Hotel on a visit to Europe with his second wife, Diane, and young son, Jason. He recounts that he was able to show Diane a secret stair to a lookout which he recalled from his investigations during his thesis preparation; 'the view was as glorious, and the pigeon droppings as numerous'<sup>4</sup> as when he had first discovered it in 1938.

With the completion of his final year at university Romberg was no longer a student and thus required to return to Germany. Faced with the threat of a military call-up on his return, he thought to undertake a doctoral thesis at ETH-Z, but soon after enrolling was awarded a travel scholarship by the Swiss Federal Board of Education, with which he intended to journey to Australia. A fellow student, Hans Menne, had connections with the State Electricity Commission (SEC) in Melbourne. Menne's family had billeted an Australian soldier who was part of the occupying force in the Rhineland, and the soldier, now an executive at the SEC, had offered Menne assistance in acquiring work in Australia. Menne however elected to join the Nazi Party. Romberg was able to take up the offer instead, thanks to an excellent reference from Salvisberg.

Departing Zurich in August 1938 on his BMW motorbike, Romberg rode to Bremen to enquire about available boat passages to Australia. It was here that he was confronted with the reality of a growing number of people trying to escape Nazi Germany, and was informed that all routes were fully booked for the next twelve months. It was only a late cancellation that enabled him to acquire a ticket. While it was a requirement of entry into Australia that he purchase a return ticket, Romberg admitted that from the outset he never had any intention of returning to Europe.<sup>5</sup>

On 16 August 1938 the German ship, the *Mosel*, departed Antwerp for the five week journey to Australia. The *Mosel* was an ordinary freighter with room for about a dozen passengers however due to demand officers' cabins had been made available for passengers. Romberg was given a comfortable cabin with porthole view to the foredeck. His fellow travellers were nearly all Jewish refugees from Germany and unused to sea travel. Romberg amusingly recalled one passenger who spent four days on deck watching for dolphins after missing their first appearance.<sup>6</sup>

Australia was sighted on the 22 September 1938, and the *Mosel* berthed at Port Pirie on the edge of the Spencer Gulf, South Australia. None of the passengers knew what to expect, but the first view was favourably compared with their memories of European landscapes.<sup>7</sup> On arrival the passengers received the only mail in five weeks, which revealed the brutal intent of the anti-Jewish campaign in Germany. At port, passengers were required to stay on board for official immigration and health checks. Most had never travelled to a foreign country, and had not forgotten the harassment they had faced from officials in Germany. On filling in a questionnaire one couple proceeded to put 'Jewish' under the race box, but were informed by the customs officer that this was a religious sect and not considered a race in Australia. As passengers disembarked, they watched the *Mosel* being loaded with lead bars from the smelter works lining the harbour for the return trip to Germany.

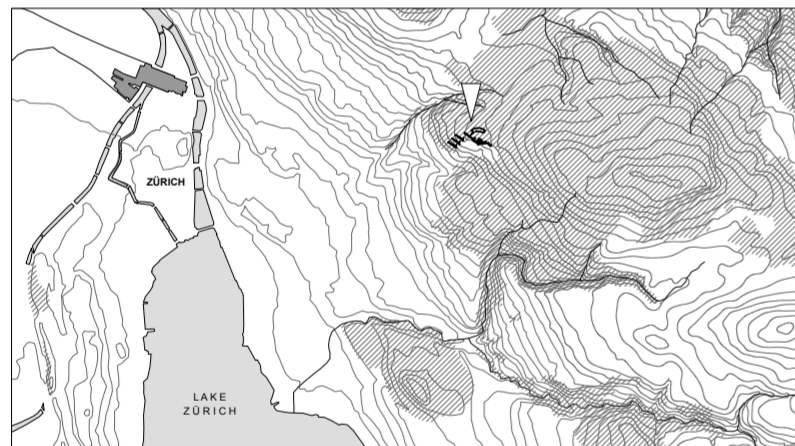
Romberg, having procured money, a police certificate of character and a health certificate along with a letter of recommendation from the University, had his passport stamped on receipt of the return ticket. He had arrived in Australia.



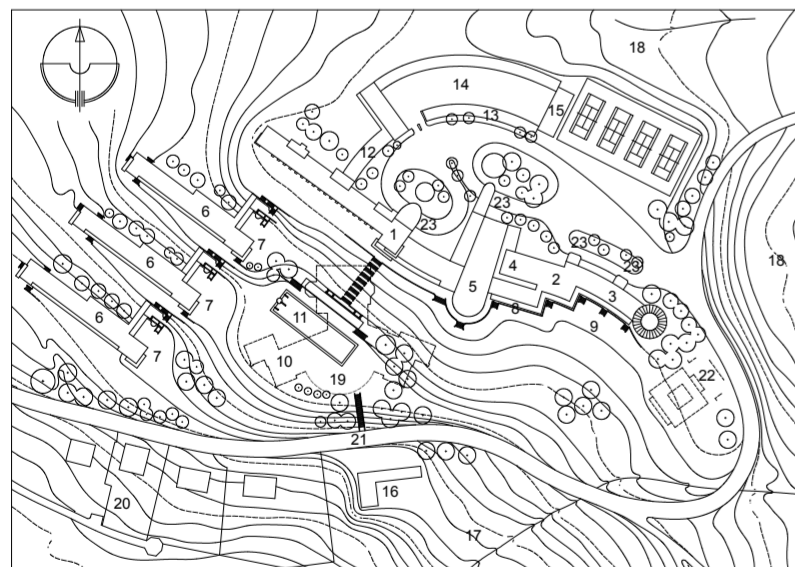
#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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#### FREDERICK ROMBERG, THESIS PROJECT, ETH-Z. DOLDER GRAND HOTEL, ZURICH, 1938 (UNBUILT) Drawings and visualisations by Michael Spooner

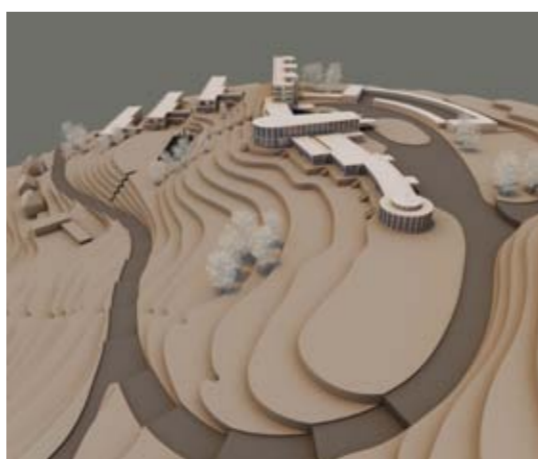
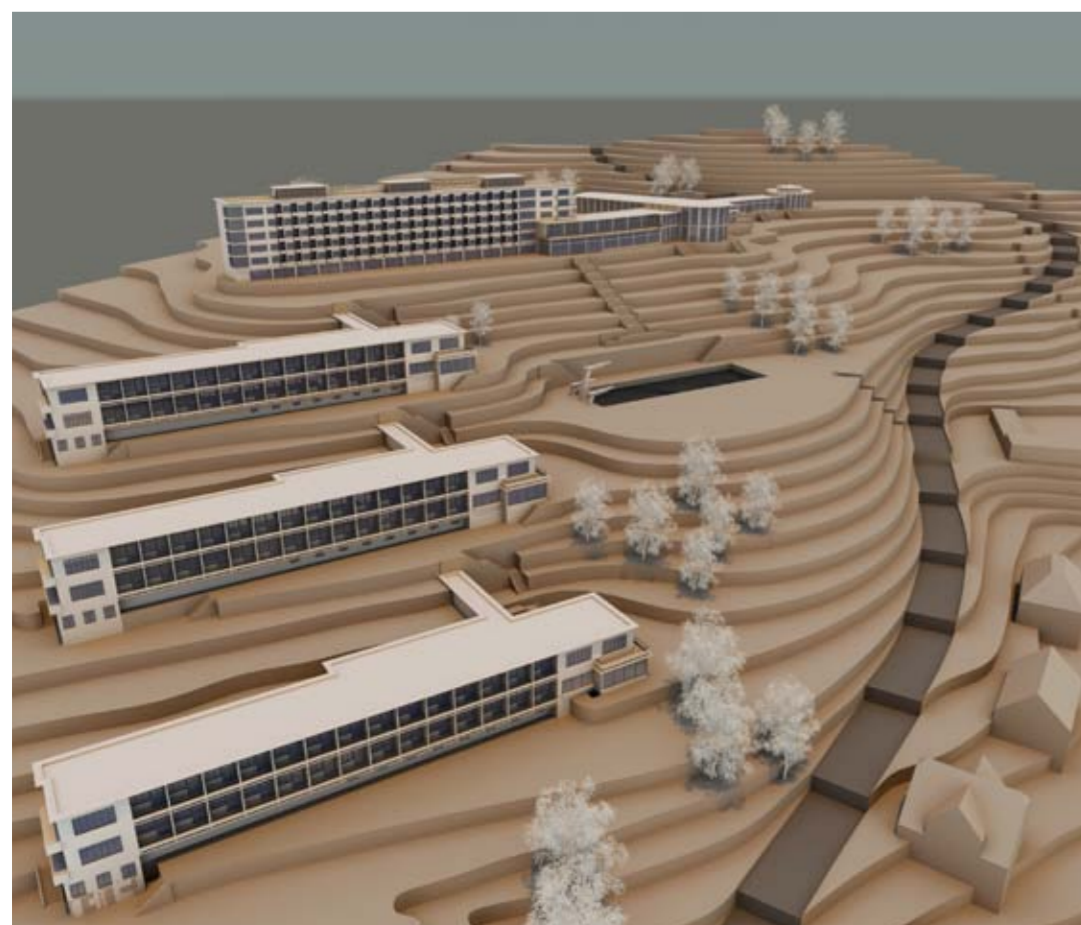
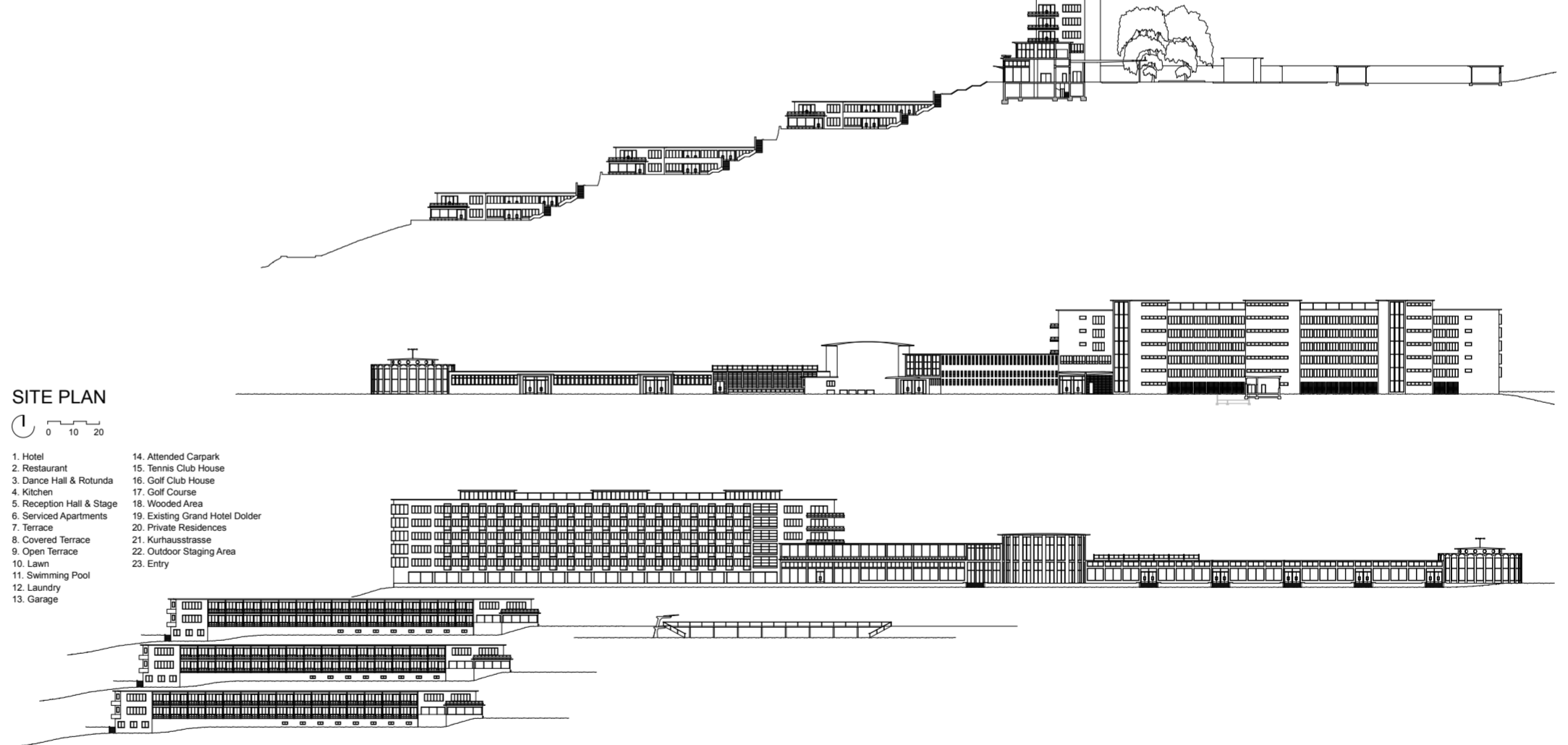


#### LOCATION PLAN



#### SITE PLAN

1. Hotel
2. Restaurant
3. Dance Hall & Rotunda
4. Kitchen
5. Reception Hall & Stage
6. Serviced Apartments
7. Terrace
8. Covered Terrace
9. Open Terrace
10. Lawn
11. Swimming Pool
12. Laundry
13. Garage
14. Attended Carpark
15. Tennis Club House
16. Golf Club House
17. Golf Course
18. Wooded Area
19. Existing Grand Hotel Dolder
20. Private Residences
21. Kurhausstrasse
22. Outdoor Staging Area
23. Entry



#### Endnotes

1. The Romberg Collection includes copies of:
  - Otto Rudolf Salvisberg 1937, (Julius Hoffmann Verlag, Stuttgart, 1937), an edition devoted to the Hoffman-La Roche administration wing.
  - Otto Rudolf Salvisberg 1935, (Julius Hoffmann Verlag, Stuttgart, 1935) includes a tuberculosis hospital in Bern, the distinctive heating plant completed at ETH-Z, and a large private house in Bern.

Further publications documenting the wing designed by Salvisberg include:

2. Frederick Romberg, 'Before Gromboyd: an architectural history', Vol. 1, 1986, typescript, Romberg Collection, RMIT Design Archives, 105b.
3. Between 2005 and 2009 the hotel underwent extensive renovations

4. Alexander Bieri, Robert Spreng and his photographs of O.R. Salvisberg's executive office building for F. Hoffmann-La Roche Ltd in Basel, (Editiones Roche, Basel, 2001) and Ruggero Tropeano & Walter Mair, 21/101, (Editiones Roche, Basel, 2010) which records in detail the large meeting room on the second level.
4. Romberg, 'Before Gromboyd: an architectural history', 116.
5. Frederick Romberg, 'Australian Journey 1938', translated 1980 by Frederick Romberg, typescript, Romberg Collection, RMIT Design Archive, 3.
6. Romberg, 'Australian Journey 1938', 4.
7. Romberg, 'Australian Journey 1938', 5.