

Above:  
Frederick Romberg  
Romberg House  
Heidelberg, 1941

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,'<sup>1</sup> 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 entry described by a wall of reeded 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 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 smartly made from timber. Timber-flooring, filleted wall intersections and door jambs 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 elegantly curved timber deck extending from the upper storey bedroom. The exterior is described in a white painted brick, detailed exposed eaves, exaggerated curved downpipes, and a roughly hewn stone chimney that continues into the interior providing fire surrounds and mantel. The site below is described by coarsely terraced landscaping and includes the original timber garden shed that adventurously leans into the steep slope. Well proportioned, and bathed in natural light, the house was never sold during Romberg's lifetime and members of his family still lived there up until its purchase in 2011, after which it continued to be used by its new owners as a family home.

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. Animosities thus simmered until Verena turned a hose on the neighbour's wife, thereafter the driveway remained firmly in the Romberg's sole 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 Newburn Pty Ltd, the company Romberg had set up during the development of Newburn 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, organised a bus trip to the Wells of Sheba and a visit to a synagogue, the first Romberg had seen from inside, and which he confesses to being very much impressed by.

To Romberg's eyes Switzerland appeared largely untouched by the preceding years of war. In Zurich, visiting ETH-Z, he was happily surprised to be recognised by the attendant at the cloak counter of the University canteen, who also enquired after Verena. He also claimed the other half of the travel scholarship that had taken him to Australia by submitting his report entitled 'Australian Journey',

some eight years after his departure. Unfortunately, his visit to the Sulzers, while notable for a series of memorable dinners, did not achieve its intended aim and Dr Sulzer declined to get involved in the apartment project.

A subsequent visit to his parents in Harburg proved difficult as non locals were virtually prohibited from entry. It was only the Sulzers' connections that enabled Romberg to buy a four day train pass from Paris to Stockholm that took in Harburg. During the train trip, he was stunned by the destruction in Germany, in particular the decimation of central Cologne. Arriving in Harburg, which had also been ruined by war, Romberg endeavoured to contact his parents without knowledge of their whereabouts and they no knowledge of his impending arrival.

Romberg made his way to the central square of Harburg only to find the family residence had been destroyed in a bombing raid. The townhouse and medical rooms had previously been described by an enfilade suite of rooms and a rear garden with a magnificent copper beech. His family had survived and at the invitation of a local civil servant were staying at a small country mansion that had been requisitioned to house refugees fleeing the Russian occupation of East Germany. His step-father, Dr Riebeling, a formidable and popular man who had evidently earned the respect of his community, was allocated two large rooms at the mansion, housing the family as well as furniture and family treasures saved from the townhouse. Romberg arrived just in time to celebrate his mother's birthday.

Accompanying Dr Riebeling on his medical visits Romberg took note of the remains of the anti-aircraft placements, trenches and dugouts left by the German Army. During the War Dr Riebeling had run the military hospital in Harburg but denied any knowledge of the atrocities coming to light despite the Bergen-Belsen prisoner-of-war 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 a commonwealth citizen such as Romberg could work in his favour. Nothing came of the investigation.

Undeterred by his lack of financial success, but relieved at seeing his parents and journeying back to Europe, Romberg returned to Melbourne via America. The Spring and La Trobe Streets apartment project, the initial reason for his journey, lingered in the background until 1948 when the Commonwealth government announced the compulsory acquisition of the land, by which time Romberg had turned his attention to other projects.

Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Frederick Romberg, 'Before Gromboyd: an architectural history', Vol 1, 1986, typescript, Romberg Collection, RMIT Design Archives, 184a.

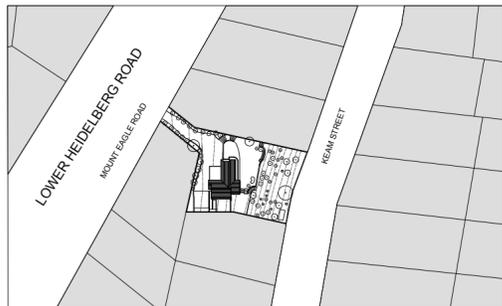


ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

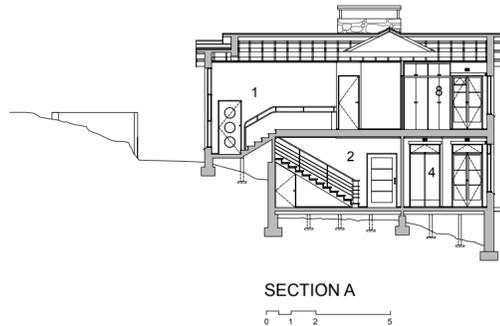
Frederick Romberg: an architectural survey is supported through funding from the Australian Government's Your Community Heritage Program.

The RMIT Design Archives thanks Zoe Edquist and Mark Douglass for the opportunity to view the Romberg House.

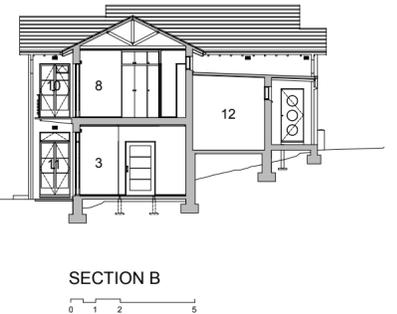
FREDERICK ROMBERG, ROMBERG HOUSE, HEIDELBERG, 1941 (BUILT) Drawings by Letó Melanie Tsolakis and Michael Spooner



LOCATION PLAN

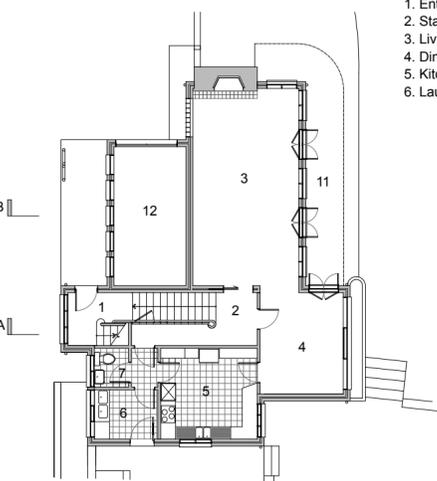


SECTION A

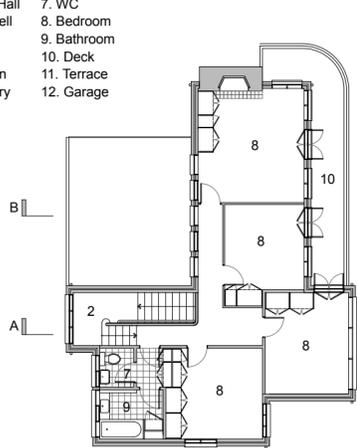


SECTION B

- 1. Entry Hall
- 2. Stairwell
- 3. Living
- 4. Dining
- 5. Kitchen
- 6. Laundry
- 7. WC
- 8. Bedroom
- 9. Bathroom
- 10. Deck
- 11. Terrace
- 12. Garage



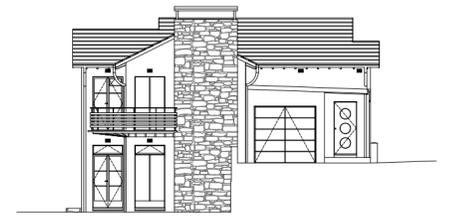
ENTRY & LOWER LEVEL FLOOR PLAN



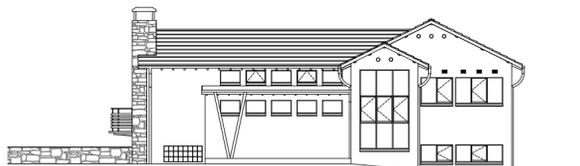
UPPER LEVEL FLOOR PLAN



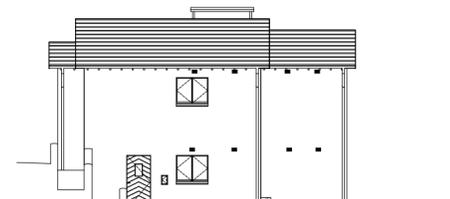
EAST ELEVATION



NORTH ELEVATION



WEST ELEVATION



SOUTH ELEVATION

