



GLENUNGA FLATS  
Melbourne 1941  
Architect: Frederick Romberg



NEWBURN FLATS  
Melbourne 1939  
Architect: Frederick Romberg



**Top:**  
Romberg and Shaw  
Glenunga Flats  
Armadale, 1940

**Middle Left:**  
Romberg and Shaw  
Newburn Flats  
Melbourne, 1939

**Bottom:**  
Frederick Romberg  
Hilstan Flats  
Brighton  
1939 (demolished)

**Middle Right:**  
Frederick Romberg  
Stanhill Flats  
Melbourne  
1943-1950

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 short-lived. Subsequently, Romberg left the practice and began a partnership with Mary Turner Shaw who had recently re-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 'Gromboyd' 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 Romberg's long venture into property development and launched his reputation as an independent architect. Newburn, was an adaption of Newburgh, a town in Scotland, after which the original mansion had been named. The construction of the apartments - stripped concrete and formwork raised by steel shutters in two feet lifts, was new for Melbourne. Influenced by the Swiss practice of incorporating art works in buildings Romberg enlisted Gert Sellheim to design Aboriginal motifs for each entrance porch and a sun dial prominent on the façade. Although held up by shortages of building materials and labour due to war restrictions, Newburn was completed by early 1941.

Financially, the project was not a success, due to the losses incurred by the slow construction. Subsequently, Romberg invoked the penalty clause in the building contract. When the builder blamed the delays on the evident war shortages Romberg took heed of prudent advice not to take the

matter to court, instead negotiating a 'fair dinkum settlement' in the Australian tradition of flipping a coin to settle a wager. The builder promptly paid up.<sup>1</sup>

Glenunga Flats, Armadale, completed in 1940, was the last private commission executed by Romberg and Shaw before all building was stopped by war regulation. Glenunga was commissioned by the brother of Dr Paul Stratmann with whom Romberg had travelled on the ship *Mosel* on the voyage to Australia. The client imposed no restrictions on the design and Romberg would later cite the apartments as one of his favourites from this period.<sup>2</sup>

Glenunga clearly exhibits Romberg's debt to the International Style. The building shows a concern for natural light and subtle materiality in the form of delicate white render over brick that makes up the exterior walls, the timber and tile interior, and the striking stone rubble work of the anchoring chimneys. Influences of Swiss, Dutch and Scandinavian *Heimatstil* are situated alongside playful elements such as a collection of porthole windows in the living areas, angled box windows in each bedroom, and conspicuously striped sun shades over the larger areas of glazing. Placing the building hard against the property boundary allowed Romberg to dedicate more than a third of the site to landscaped garden viewable from each of the four apartments.

A mood of uncertainty prevailed among émigrés since the outbreak of the War. A German neighbour had been interned in a camp and the Rombergs were worried about the welfare of their daughter who was technically Australian if they were to be interned. An initial fear of internment proved unfounded. Instead, they were required to report to the local police station once a week. When Paris fell to the Germans in 1940 they were prohibited from travelling, and had to surrender 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 national Romberg found himself treated with hostility and discrimination.

Stanhill Flats on St Kilda Road, Melbourne, were commissioned in 1943 by Stanley Korman the Director of the Centenary Woollen Mills which produced for the military. However, Romberg was only able to complete a sketch design for the maximum number of apartments allowable under the code before he was requisitioned by the Allied Works Council (AWC) and sent to Alice Springs

in the Northern Territory of Australia, over 2000 kilometres from Melbourne, to join the Civil Aliens Corps (CAC), and then on to Katherine, a further 1200 kilometres.

He joined Jewish refugees, Germans and Italians, and an Austrian Baron who had lost his title after World War I. From their isolated camp the internees were driven to a rocky outpost where they were made to move and break rocks to be used in the production of metal for the resurfacing of roads. The labour was enervating in the tropical heat, and commonly sustained injuries often became infected. Dysentery was a constant risk. On more than one occasion Romberg was hospitalised. These trips to the hospital offered respite, as the patients could watch films at night and were delighted with the attention of the few female nursing staff. Moreover, Romberg was not treated as an alien worker but as any other patient.

Eventually Romberg's architectural background resulted in a transfer to a better position in Alice Springs, in the care of Cyril Hudspeth, Chief 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 internment. Back at the drafting boards, Romberg was attached to the Deputy Resident Engineer as the Works Supervisor 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's 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 Larrimah, south of Katherine, where he was assigned clerical duties, and rather amusingly found himself responsible for keeping camp time by banging out the hours with an iron pipe on an old railway sleeper. Occasionally he attached himself to the Medical Officer on his rounds, revisiting his fascination with the profession that as a student in Europe saw him sitting in on various dissection and medical presentations.

Following his discharge from the CAC 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 1943. 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 Hilstan Flats in Brighton for Korman and his brother Hilel (hence Stanhill-Hilstan), which was completed in 1947, but demolished in the 1970's 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 Strizic, Wolfgang Sievers 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.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Frederick Romberg, 'Before Gromboyd: an architectural history', Vol. 1, 1986, typescript, Romberg Collection, RMIT Design Archives, 175-176.

<sup>2</sup> Romberg, 'Before Gromboyd: an architectural history', 183a.



#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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**ROMBERG AND SHAW, GLENUNGA FLATS, ARMADALE, 1940 (BUILT)** Drawings by Michael Spooner



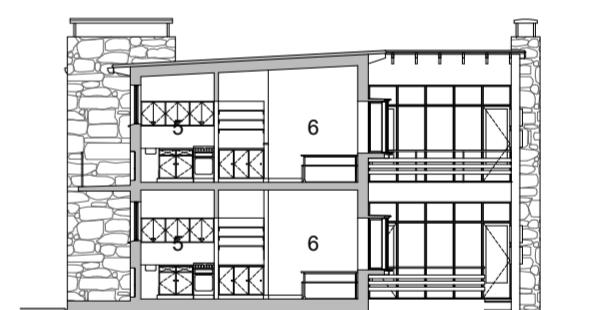
LOCATION PLAN



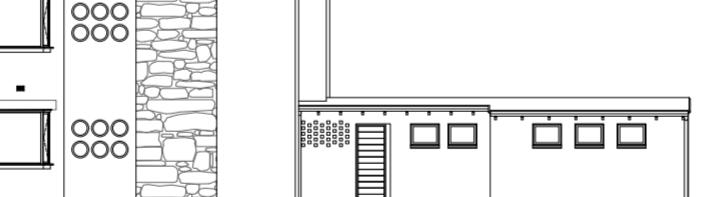
NORTH ELEVATION



SECTION A



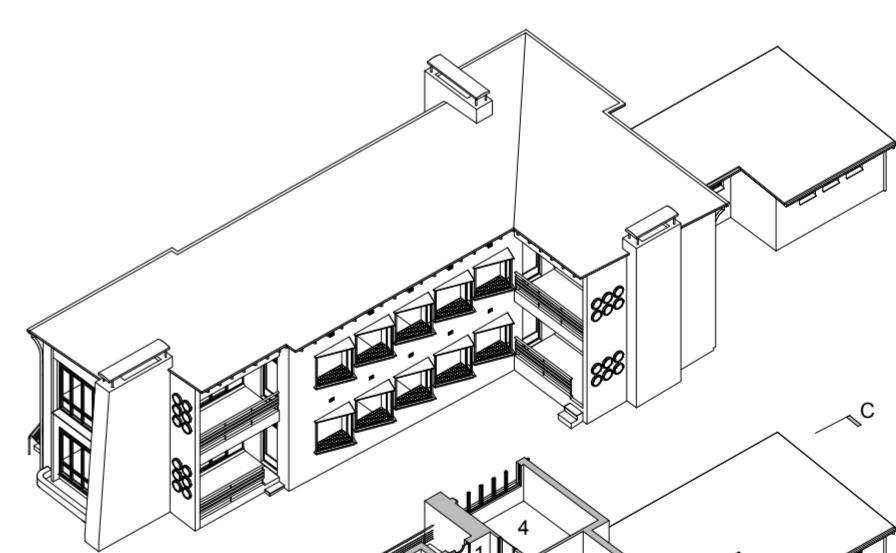
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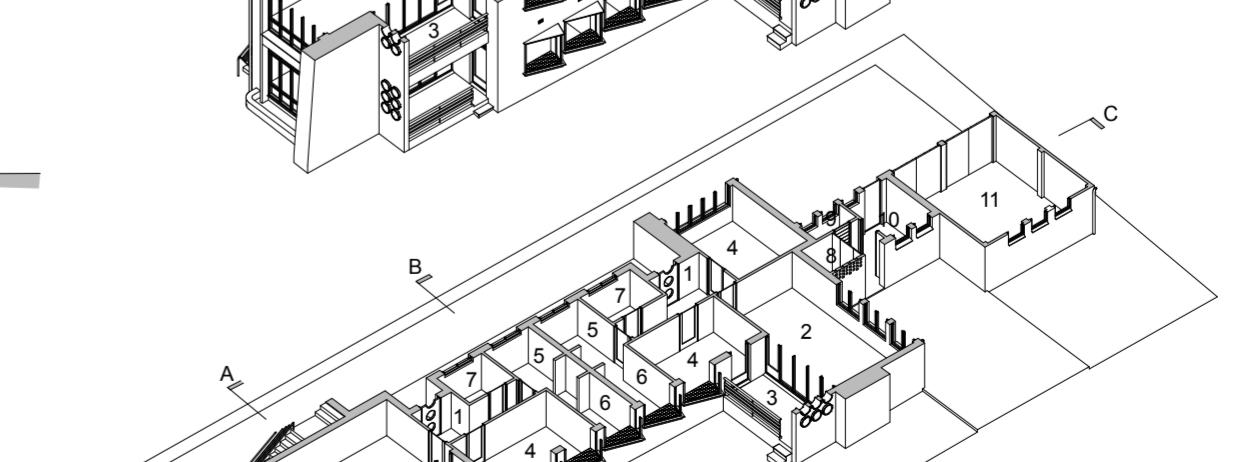
WEST ELEVATION



SECTION C



FIRST FLOOR PLAN



GROUND PLAN

- |                |                 |
|----------------|-----------------|
| 1. Entry Hall  | 7. Bathroom     |
| 2. Living Room | 8. Garden Tools |
| 3. Terrace     | 9. WC           |
| 4. Bedroom     | 10. Laundry     |
| 5. Kitchen     | 11. Garage      |
| 6. Dining      |                 |

EAST ELEVATION