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Wolfgang Sievers, Stanhill flats designed by Frederick Romberg
Albert Park, Melbourne, 1951, b&w photograph, 38.2 x 49.2 cm.
National Library of Australia, obj-161673672

the architecture of frederick romberg through the lens of wolfgang sievers

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I examine the architecture of émigré artist Frederick Romberg (1913-1992) through the lens of émigré photographer, Wolfgang Sievers (1913-2007). This multidisciplinary approach of analyzing Romberg's architecture through the photographs of Wolfgang Sievers serves to better understand Australian migrant art and just as well, the migrant experience and migrant identity. Romberg and Sievers fled the rise of Nazism in Germany and arrived in Australia in 1938, bringing with them the influence of German Modernist traditions. The professional relationship between architect and photographer resulted in a multitude of photographs whose nature of architectural form and designs communicate not just the physical characteristics of buildings, but also the experience of exile, constant artistic interaction, collaboration, and active promotion of modernist aesthetics in Melbourne. Both Romberg's deliberate use and dependence of Sievers' Bauhaus-trained trained photographic practice to capture architecture, and likewise, Sievers' selective photographic captures of Romberg's Modern architectural forms, provide insight as to what and whom the Modern artist in exile depends on, engages with, and seeks once in a foreign landscape. Focusing on Sievers' photographs of Romberg's designs for Stanhill Flats and Newburn flats, the paper contends that documentary photographs further provide a historical reality of the past and architectural practice. The photographs put us, the viewers, in the setting Romberg found himself in and at around the time his buildings were executed; they illuminate the emerging phenomenon of German modernism in Australia during the 1950's. These photographs, providing flat, almost 360-degree views of architectural forms throughout Romberg's artistic career, allow for an analysis of the modernist traditions that Romberg employed in his designs. Ultimately, I hope to demonstrate how Romberg and Sievers diligently and assertively worked together in becoming successful artists in Australia once off of the Mosel and Comorin ships with fresh Modernism in their bags.

keywords German modernism, Australia, Frederick romberg, Wolfgang sievers, 20th Century

In the year of 1938, architect Frederick Romberg, aboard the *Mosel*, and industrial photographer Wolfgang Sievers, aboard the *Comorin*, arrived in Australia; bringing with them their valuable sense of Modernist traditions that would transform the Australian landscape in the consequent years to follow. Although Romberg and Sievers experienced separate journeys to Australia, once settled in Melbourne, their work and personal experiences frequently intertwined to produce a lasting collaboration and friendship. It is the intention of this paper to illustrate the constant artistic interaction between artists, migrant experiences encountered by both, and the active promotion of modernist aesthetics derived from a Bauhaus-inspired training.

Using a multidisciplinary approach, I will incorporate the photographer and the physicality of the photographs to provide an analysis of the architecture and life of the architect. The reason for incorporating Sievers' photographs in the analysis of Romberg's architecture is three fold.

The first reason as to why Sievers' photographs are included in this analysis of Romberg's architecture can be illustrated when considering the Bauhaus aim and the literal translation and incorporation of the Bauhaus principle amidst the work of these two artists. Afterall, for Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius, the union and marriage of artistic practices was at the core of the Bauhaus aesthetic. The application of the Bauhaus principle is demonstrated with the collaboration of these two artists and the marriage of their distinct fields, architecture and photography.

The second reason as to the integration of Sievers and his photographs in this paper is due to the visual dimension that the photographs create and contribute in regards to Romberg's work. The visual dimension of the photographs demonstrate the setting in which Romberg lived and worked in when executing his architectural designs. This in turn functions as a pivotal visual backdrop and visual aid that revitalizes the memories of immigration, exile, triumphs, and tribulations as recounted by Frederick Romberg and Wolfgang Sievers that will appear in this paper from their respective unpublished autobiography and unpublished catalogue. Just as well, this visual dimension also allows for tangible visual evidence and documentation of the emerging German modernism that appeared in a transforming Australia. Furthermore, Sievers' photographs not only allow for a historical reality of Frederick's Romberg work, but also function as preservers of architectural buildings and memories that no longer exist in the present-day.

Lastly, the numerous similarities between Sievers and Romberg point as to why the work and migrant experience of Sievers is included in the analysis. Besides German nationality, some interesting biographical parallels include the same birth year of 1913, early exposure to the arts at a young age by family members promoted through both their experienced and privileged upbringings), a fascination with architecture (a young Sievers assisted his art historian father by photographing the architecture of Karl Friedrich Schinkel), the fleeing of Nazism, arrival in the same year of 1938 in Australia after first heading to England from Germany (making Romberg and Sievers the same age when stepping foot on Australian soil in search of a new life), previous study interests that changed to their respective fields because of the war (Romberg originally studied law and Sievers originally intended to study archeology), a Bauhaus-inspired training, and, of course, the settlement in the city of Melbourne that led to both artists meeting each other. According to Isobel Crombie, it was a mutual circle of friends that enabled Romberg and Sievers to meet each other in the 1940's¹. And, according to Helen Ennis, Romberg and Sievers later served in the same employment company in Australia during the war². Clearly, such an abundant amount of similarities cannot be simply overlooked; which is why these similarities are thus applied. Furthermore, it is my hope that in sharing both the individual migrant identities of these two artists, a grand picture concerning the migration of a German modernism to Australia and of the life and friendship of the *émigrés* that brought such a modernism, can be further brought to light.

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Before emigrating to Australia, in 1936, Wolfgang Sievers received an intense Bauhaus-inspired training at the Contemporaria School for Applied Arts in Berlin, an offshoot of the Bauhaus comprising of Bauhaus core beliefs that proved to be pivotal for Sievers. The staff consisted of many former Bauhaus instructors that had fled there after the suppression of the Bauhaus by the Nazis. While there, Sievers learned about the 'New Objectivity' style characterized by sharp focus and precision, as well as modernist photography consisting of reductive compositions and dramatic points of view known as 'New Photography' that Bauhaus members such as László Moholy-Nagy advocated³. Sievers was able to study under Erich Balg, who offered him a wide range of practical work during Sievers' 16 hour days at the school.

Before studying architecture, Romberg was part of a "circle of leftist intellectuals and wealthy off-beats, who met regularly on a country estate called Nottendorf, some 60 km West of Harburg"⁴. According to Romberg, "the discussion in front of the huge fireplace focused on politics and art, like everywhere else in Germany at that time. Architecture, of course, also feature prominent, especially the latest trends represented by Gropius' Bauhaus in Dessau"⁵. It is highly probable that Romberg was further exposed to the Bauhaus when he found himself in Berlin to change universities for the winter semester of his law studies in 1932 and 1933, during the last years of the Bauhaus.

Romberg's architectural training took place at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH-Z) from 1933 until 1938. During that time, Walter Gropius held a workshop at the ETH at the time Romberg was there⁶, which can account for Romberg's Bauhaus-inspired buildings and elements.

As mentioned by Harriet Edquist, "during his years at the ETH-Z; Romberg developed a remarkably consistent and rigorous language of architectural form. Based on the ideology of the modern movement, Gropius and Salvisberg in particular, he handled its elements - ribbon windows, cantilevers, pilotis, roof gardens, open plan and the new urban typologies like the apartment block, with great assurance"⁷.

It was through Romberg's education at the ETH that he was able to obtain a Travelling Scholarship from the Swiss Federal Board of Education that further enabled his journey to Australia where he planned to settle.

On arrival to Australia in 1938, Romberg translated his first name of Friedrich to Frederick, stating that "determined to make a brand new start, I would have anglicised my surname too, but as an enemy alien in wartime this was not permissible"⁸. Although Sievers did not translate his name, both arrived in Australia with a strong dislike of the country that their eyes were seeing. "It was bloody awful. It really was appalling", Sievers said of his arrival in Australia⁹, just as Romberg commented, "unfortunately, amongst the thousands we are passing I cannot discover one which might be described as good architecture"¹⁰. Faced with the obstacle of transforming Australia, or Melbourne in particular, into a sight with more visual appeal, Romberg, as well as Sievers, struggled with perfecting their language skills. According to Romberg, "while not lacking in keenness and sound architectural grounding, I had some major hurdles to overcome before becoming truly useful to the firm. My command of English was still halting, especially where the technical terms were concerned, I was inexperienced in the Imperial system which I had encountered only once before when working briefly on Salvisberg's Roche project in Welwyn Garden City and I was of course totally unfamiliar with Australian building practices in general"¹¹.

In his unpublished autobiography, Romberg intimately shares his experiences as an émigré. He writes, "but wherever the migrant comes from, he will find it hard if not impossible ever to lose the feeling of being a tolerated guest in a strange country. It is probably true that this is not limited to Australia but applies just as much to the few other countries which today still accept migrants. For those who for some reason or other had to leave their homeland, the loss of an unquestionable feeling of belonging is one of the saddest side effects"¹². Such a passage

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illuminates the psychological turmoil and hardships that Romberg, and most probably, other émigrés encountered. Nonetheless, both Romberg and Sievers worked diligently at overcoming such limitations and establishing their careers in the foreign landscape of Australia.

One of Romberg's first projects and his first independent commission was due to a large sum of money he received from his father-in-law that Romberg wisely decided to invest in real estate. He wrote, "By now I was sufficiently familiar with Melbourne to know that Queens Road was an excellent location, and, when an old mansion on a 100 ft. frontage came up for sale, in August 1939, I bought it for 4, 850 pounds"¹³. The property was named Newburn Pty. Ltd, which would later house the flats known as Newburn Flats.



f1_ Wolfgang Sievers, Newburn Flats

Queen's Road, Melbourne 1951, gelatin silver, 21 x 25 cm. National Library of Australia, obj-143504004

There were many legal implications caused by Romberg's alien status in Australia, but in the end, Romberg succeeded in making the company immune from interference in wartime by naming his father-in-law (Swiss) and his daughter (Australian) as the shareholders in Newburn Pty. Ltd.. Newburn, Romberg's earliest and ground-breaking example, is great evidence of the influence of Gropius. This building is strongly reminiscent of the Berlin Housing Estate attributed to Gropius in 1930 with the curved elements present and Romberg's offset of "each flat unit in plan to give privacy to the balconies, views, and a north orientation"¹⁴.



f2_ Wolfgang Sievers, Newburn Flats

Queen's Road, Melbourne, 1951, gelatin silver, 16.7 x 24.1 cm. National Library of Australia, obj-161029801

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The garages designed by Romberg, evidenced by Sievers' photograph, demonstrate a Bauhaus-driven simplicity comprising of a checkerboard pattern. With Sievers' magnificent captures of a bold, pure white Newburn starkly contrasting against shadows and its surroundings, the pressures from the outbreak of war that were threatening the construction of the building seem minimal in comparison to the grandness of the victor. With this project, Romberg was forced to leave his first employer, Stephenson and Turner; losing the support of a strong professional team and consequently being forced to depend only on himself in a foreign country with his new independent venture. Through Newburn and the ambition behind it, Romberg nonetheless was able to learn how to properly financially manage his accounts as a foreigner and contribute his own aesthetic while transforming what he had first seen when arriving to Australia. When first seeing Australia, Romberg commented, "There are no blocks of flats that I can see. Seemingly everybody here has his own house. Even mass housing, or settlements in the European sense, appear to be unknown. All the houses are very clean and of approximately the same size, but fairly different in appearances". With Newburn then, Romberg was able to create mass housing in a uniform fashion that not only served as indication of his ability in a new country as an émigré and architectural practitioner, but of his future architectural designers and triumphs. Evidently, Romberg was able to overcome the financial, political, emotional, and professional challenges that arose and as a result, the viewer sees a strong, erect building standing as the launch of Romberg's career.

With the challenges of Newburn, Romberg was also at the same time being challenged by his migrant status. Still not able to call himself an 'architect' after his Zurich training was not recognized on Australian soil, Romberg had to earn such a title after passing examinations in two subjects: "Professional Practice", and "Specifications"; becoming a registered architect in May 1940.

Romberg's most well-known project, a high-rise block known as Stanhill, was interrupted in 1943 when he had to report to the Allied Works Council. It is through this experience that Romberg's tribulations as an émigré surface with the elaborate illustrations of the pain and turmoil he and other émigrés, Wolfgang Sievers included, experienced.

Romberg recounts that amongst all of the soldiers: "we aliens were invariably directed to the tail end of the queues. In the bare, draughty sheds in which we spent the nights we were given the last remaining spaces, after all the others had selected theirs. On the trains, too, there was apartheid: our compartments, too few and the most run down, were marked in large letters: "Aliens". I had never experienced this kind of thing before[...] Now I was the lowest of the low, -part of a distrusted bunch of outcasts thrown together in the Civil Aliens Corps, a despised offshoot of the Allied Works Council"¹⁵.

Romberg goes on to say that at some point, some Jewish individuals were "complaining bitterly that they were treated no better than in Nazi Germany"¹⁶. In these passages, Romberg's description of the demoralization he encountered goes on in several pages of his autobiography, claiming that the discrimination that he faced was worse than the lack of privacy, exhaustion, injuries, and sickness that he encountered: "we were as docile as cattle led to the slaughter house. The only consolation was that the Australian contingent of the convey, after all, was subject to the same hardships, but at least they were first when it came to tucker hand-outs or bedding for the night. It was the discrimination which I found the hardest to take"¹⁷.

Both architect and photographer, serving together for less than two years in the 4th Labour Employment Company, depended on each other for moral and social support. This shared common experience, although unfortunate, united the two émigré artists with a friendship further amplified by their shared modernist aesthetic. As Ennis writes, "the forging of personal and professional relationships were central to the slow process of reconnection to a social body"¹⁸.



f3_ Wolfgang Sievers, Stanhill flats designed by Frederick Romberg

Albert Park, Melbourne, 1951, b&w photograph, 38.2 x 49.2 cm. National Library of Australia, obj-161673672

It wasn't until Romberg was discharged from the Allied Works Council in 1944 and Sievers in 1946 that they were able to return to Melbourne and apply for naturalization. In 1945, Romberg was granted citizenship and in 1946, Sievers was also granted citizenship; both free to make their own decisions and once again, continue their endless commitment to modern art. Romberg started plans for the infamous Stanhill that would justify all of his efforts as an émigré, person, and architect. Choosing Sievers once again to capture his new architectural product, Sievers' successful captures and attention to detail of various angles and physical characteristics of Stanhill provide almost a 360 flat degree view of every angle of the building Romberg envisioned while encountering anxiety, tragedy, and other various ordeals.



f4_ Wolfgang Sievers, Stanhill flats designed by Frederick Romberg

Albert Park, Melbourne, 1951, b&w photograph, 24.1 x 16.8 cm. National Library of Australia, obj-161673434



f5_ Wolfgang Sievers, Stanhill flats designed by Frederick Romberg

Albert Park, Melbourne, 1951, b&w photograph, 49.3 x 35.9 cm. National Library of Australia, obj-161673553

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With all of these various angles; upwards, downwards, close-ups of details, and larger frames containing the surrounding street, Sievers allows viewers of his photographs to be able to see and understand “the composite character of the building, both as a totality and in terms of its parts”, a component insisted upon by Gropius¹⁹. Through Sievers’ variety of angles and perspectives in his photographs, a viewer is capable of “walking” visually around Stanhill and even within Stanhill as Sievers manages on also capturing the interior; ultimately fulfilling Gropius’ call for moving around a complex in order to “grasp the inherent harmony of its different parts”²⁰. As Isobel Crombie writes, Sievers’ photographs visually sweep the viewer “up and around the building in a potentially disorienting but exhilarating manner that perfectly reflects the contemporary nature of Romberg’s work”²¹.

Just as well, Sievers’ photographs take the viewer out for a stroll to see Stanhill both during the day and night. Sievers’ photograph of Stanhill at night, for example, accentuates an illuminated Stanhill sign, a window emanating light, and other light sources overhead that that add a very polished glow to the reflective glass and overall character of the building. Stanhill is presented as powerful and alive, the lights indicating a human presence. Like Bauhaus student Lyonel Feininger’s night-time photographs of Walter Gropius’ Bauhaus Dessau buildings taken in 1929, an element of mystery surrounds Stanhill as the dark tones make the human eye and mind attempt to discern the unseen and keep searching for more recognizable shapes.

With Romberg’s architecture and Sievers’ modernist photographs of the architecture, we are able to see an “artistic record of a golden era of Australian industry”, where both artists were able to “transform the Australian image from a land of sheep and wheat to that of modern industrial nation –with the worker at its centre”²². Just as well, the contribution to Australian cultural life by Sievers and Romberg in the sectors of art and industry, was able to open the sensitive, often overlooked, experience of migrant identity. Furthermore, Although Romberg did not solely rely on Wolfgang Sievers to photograph all of his work, it is Sievers who captures the modernist aesthetics he himself shared with Romberg with his rejection of the conventional full building shot and dramatic points of view, and it is Sievers’ photographs that best demonstrates the afflictions that Romberg had to endure to reach success. This relationship between both individuals was much more than a symbiotic one ruled by client requirements, patronage, and budgets. Rather, photographer and architect genuinely worked together on creating a joint vehicle for disseminating the modern arts in Melbourne.



f6_ Wolfgang Sievers, entrance to Stanhill flats designed by Frederick Romberg

Albert Park, Melbourne, 1951, b&w photograph, 18.8 x 24.0 cm. National Library of Australia, obj-161674036

endnotes

1. Isobel Crombie, "Photographers of the Architecture of Frederick Romberg", *History of Photography* (1999): 133.
2. Helen Ennis, *Wolfgang Sievers* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2011), 26.
3. Ennis, *Wolfgang Sievers*, 11-12.
4. Unpublished autobiography. 'Before Gromboyd. An Architectural History', Manuscript, 1986, Romney Archive, Romberg and Boyd Collection, RMIT Design Archives, 51.
5. 'Before Gromboyd. An Architectural History, 52.
6. Conrad Hamann, 'Frederick Romberg, Architect', in Leslie Body and Stephen Jeffries (Eds.) *The German Connection: Sesquicentennial Essays on German-Victorian Crosscurrents in Victoria*, Allen und Unwin, Sydney, 1986.
7. Harried Edquist. *Frederick Romberg: The Architecture of Migration 1938-1975*(Melbourne: RMIT University Press, 2000), 17.
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9. Ellen Flint, "The Ghost in the Machine", 14.
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11. Unpublished autobiography. 'Before Gromboyd. An Architectural History', 158.
13. Unpublished autobiography. 'Before Gromboyd. An Architectural History', 165.
14. "Nationally Significant 20th Century Architecture", Australian Institute of Architects, <http://www.architecture.com.au/docs/default-source/vic-notable-buildings/vic-newburnflats.pdf?sfvrsn=0> (accessed 17 Dec. 2014).
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16. *Ibidem*, 191.
17. *Idem*.
18. Helen Ennis, "Blue Hydrangeas: Four émigré photographers", in *The Europeans: emigré artists in Australia, 1930-1960*, 111.
19. "Manifesto", Bauhaus, <http://bauhaus-online.de/en/atlas/das-bauhaus/idee/manifest>, (accessed 12 Jan. 2014).
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CV

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