

TRANSLATION TRANSLATION

Proceedings of the
**Society of Architectural Historians,
Australia and New Zealand**
Vol. 31

edited by Christoph Schnoor
(Auckland, New Zealand SAHANZ and Unitec ePress;
and Gold Coast, Queensland: SAHANZ, 2014).

The bibliographic citation for this paper is:

**Judith O'Callaghan, "When Gropius came to Sydney [and Melbourne]," in
*Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand:
31, Translation*, edited by Christoph Schnoor (Auckland, New Zealand: SAHANZ
and Unitec ePress; and Gold Coast, Queensland: SAHANZ, 2014), 287-298.**

Published in

*Auckland, New Zealand: SAHANZ and Unitec ePress [ISBN - 978-1-927214-12-1];
and Gold Coast, Australia: SAHANZ [ISBN - 978-0-9876055-1-1]*

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When Gropius came to Sydney [and Melbourne]

On Monday 3 May 1954, Walter and Ise Gropius alighted from a Pan American flight at Sydney's Kingsford Smith Airport. Gropius had been invited to present at the Royal Australian Institute of Architects' (RAIA) Fourth Australian Architectural Convention and his presence in Australia created an immediate stir not only within architectural circles but also the popular media. His social and professional engagements and his sometimes controversial opinions on local issues and the future of architecture were all eagerly reported. This level of attention was welcomed and in fact anticipated by the convention organisers - the New South Wales (NSW) Chapter of the RAIA - who had sought not only to attract but to provoke broad public interest in the event. The significance of Walter Gropius within the Australian architectural discourse of the 1950s has been acknowledged.

This paper looks at the way in which his momentous visit to Sydney in 1954 was interpreted broadly, across both popular and professional media. Drawing additionally on the archives of the New South Wales (NSW) Chapter of the Australian Institute of Architects (AIA), this paper traces the history and development of the Fourth Australian Architectural Convention, and in particular, Gropius' role within its strategic agenda.

Introduction

In the lead-up to the Fourth Australian Architectural Convention, the RAI A President, Robert Demaine, took time to reflect on the significance of the (now) annual event. The first convention had been held in 1950 in Perth - a rather modest one-day meeting - that Demaine deemed a success not only because it provided the opportunity for the dissemination and exchange of ideas and information, but also, as a result of the publicity generated, "the general tempo of our public relations was increased." It was, after all, "Institute policy to stimulate public relations."¹ Demaine was also impressed by the Melbourne convention that followed in 1952, where the programme had been extended to five days of papers, meetings and social activities, and by the most recent held in Brisbane in 1953. According to Demaine, "The highlight of the Brisbane Convention was the Architectural Exhibition held in the Brisbane Town Hall" which "did a great deal for the Profession by placing before the public of that City the work of the architect."² He keenly anticipated the 1954 convention and was reassured by the programme of presentations, exhibitions and activities the NSW Chapter was in the process of organizing. This had been the Chapter's first opportunity to host the event and its leadership determined that the Fourth Australian Architectural Convention would be the biggest, best and most highly publicized of all to date.

Planning

Formally advised by "Institute Headquarters" at the beginning of 1953 that it had the responsibility of organizing the Fourth Australian Architectural Convention,³ the NSW Chapter quickly appointed a Convention Organising Committee (COC) of seven which, reflecting the importance attached to the event, included the presiding President, Eric W. Andrew.⁴ The person appointed to chair the committee was Professor Henry Ingham Ashworth, then Chair of Architectural Design and History at the University of Sydney. A man of significant influence within the profession and a future Chapter and Institute President, Ashworth is perhaps best remembered for his role on the judging committee that championed Jørn Utzon's controversial scheme for the Sydney Opera House in 1957. Under Ashworth's leadership, the COC was to embark on a highly ambitious programme.

The committee's key priority was to establish an international profile for the event. Invitations were despatched to architectural associations around the world and speakers of international renown were also actively sought. In an attempt to gain sponsorship for the attendance of "two leading architects from overseas", there was a plan to submit a list of names that included Le Corbusier and Oscar Niemeyer to the Australian Federal Government in the middle of 1953.⁵ This initiative

1 Robert Demaine, "The President's Letter," *Architecture* 41, no.4 (October-December 1953): 9

2 Robert Demaine, "The President's Letter," 9.

3 Royal Institute of Australian Architects New South Wales Chapter, Minutes of Executive Meeting, 13 January 1953.

4 Royal Institute of Australian Architects New South Wales Chapter, Minutes of Council Meeting, 3 February 1953.

5 Royal Australian Institute of Architects New South Wales Chapter, Minutes of Convention Organising Committee, 27 July 1953.

apparently came to nothing, however in an effort to secure at least one “overseas expert on housing and decentralisation”,⁶ the Chapter extended invitations to a number of prominent British architects, notably Frederick Gibberd, Robert Matthew and Leslie Martin. American urban historian, Lewis Mumford, was also approached.⁷ Of these, only one – Robert Matthew – accepted and presented at the convention.

Of all the international invitees however, the most coveted was Walter Gropius. He was the first to be approached and his eventual agreement to participate in the conference represented a great coup for the NSW Chapter. When the invitation was extended early in 1953, the 69-year old had only recently retired from the Harvard University Graduate School of Design (GSD). While the significance of Gropius’ influence as Chair of Architecture was widely acknowledged, his time at the GSD was not without its difficulties. As documented by Jill Pearlman in *Inventing American Modernism*, Gropius’ relationship with Joseph Hudnut – dean and founder of the school – had dramatically deteriorated by the early 1950s.⁸ Gropius in fact had resigned from the GSD in 1952, one year ahead of his agreed retirement age, in protest against Hudnut’s decision to cancel his design fundamentals course. Nevertheless, as Pearlman recounts, Gropius remained “a heroic figure” at the GSD and within architectural circles internationally for years following his retirement.⁹ Any substantial questioning of his legacy only began in the 1960s.

Significantly, Gropius had a number of Australian connections, one dating back to the early years of the Bauhaus. The distinguished German artist, Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack, had been a student at the Weimer Bauhaus and subsequently worked briefly with Gropius in London. He was now the Art Master of Geelong Grammar in Victoria. Prominent Sydney architect, Arthur Baldwinson, had also worked closely with Gropius in London during the 1930s in the office of Maxwell Fry and was now an active member of the NSW Chapter. Additionally, there were graduates of the GSD living in Australia who had studied under Gropius, notably Peter Stephenson in Melbourne and Harry Seidler in Sydney. Stephenson, who had only just obtained his Master of Architecture degree from the GSD in 1952, was a member of the family firm of Stephenson & Turner, which by the early 1950s was on its way to becoming Australia’s largest architectural practice.¹⁰ Austrian born, Harry Seidler, had graduated from the GSD in 1946, arriving in Australia two years later at the behest of his parents. He had quickly established himself in Sydney and by the early 1950s had completed numerous residential commissions, one of which – the house he designed for his parents in Wahroonga – had won the NSW Chapter’s prestigious Sulman Medal of 1951.

6 Royal Australian Institute of Architects New South Wales Chapter, Minutes of Convention Organising Committee, 24 August 1953.

7 Royal Australian Institute of Architects New South Wales Chapter, Minutes of Convention Organising Committee, 14 September 1953.

8 Jill Pearlman, *Inventing American Modernism: Joseph Hudnut, Walter Gropius, and the Bauhaus Legacy at Harvard* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007).

9 Pearlman, *Inventing American Modernism*, 235.

10 Julie Willis, “Stephenson & Turner,” in *The Encyclopedia of Australian Architecture*, ed. Philip Goad and Julie Willis (Port Melbourne, Victoria: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 652-54.

All of these local connections, in one way or another, played their part in the carefully orchestrated itinerary prepared for Gropius' visit. Stephenson was to serve as Gropius' aide for the duration of the convention while Hirschfeld-Mack and Baldwinson had the opportunity of meeting up with their old colleague. According to Seidler, "the esteem" in which Baldwinson was held by Gropius, "was recalled at the reunion of the two men after some twenty years."¹¹ Seidler himself was to play host to Walter and Ise Gropius, driving the couple around Sydney - to his own houses in particular - and holding a dinner party in their honour at his parents' house.¹²

Both Baldwinson and Seidler were actively involved in the organization of the convention and it has been claimed by one of Seidler's biographers, Alice Spigelman, that it was on his "prompting" that the NSW Chapter invited Gropius to speak at the convention.¹³ Similarly, Helen O'Neill has argued in *A Singular Vision: Harry Seidler*, that it was Seidler who "engineered" the professor's visit.¹⁴ Whatever the circumstances, by March 1953 the COC had resolved that a letter of invitation be sent to Gropius from the Chapter President.¹⁵ While Gropius graciously accepted within two months, there were on-going complications. Firstly, Gropius planned to incorporate his visit into a trip to Japan sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation, but confirmation of his itinerary by the Foundation was not forthcoming. Even as late as September 1953 there was no definite advice and by that stage the COC seriously considered withdrawing the invitation.¹⁶ Happily, by its next meeting in October, Gropius had officially confirmed in writing.¹⁷ But then late in 1953, on the basis that there were still so many "conflicting" reports concerning the visit, the Melbourne journal, *Cross-Section* took it upon itself to telephone Gropius in Boston - just in time for its December issue. It confidently reported that not only would the professor attend the Convention, but would also visit Melbourne, and was looking forward to seeing "the work that the younger men of Australia are doing."¹⁸

A 'visit' to Victoria was not part of the original plan and when it was officially made known to the NSW Chapter that Melbourne architect Roy Grounds had invited Gropius to his home state - in a "private" capacity - there was some consternation.¹⁹ Given that the Chapter was footing the bill for Gropius' fares to and from the USA, Ashworth responded by writing a letter to RAIA President Robert Demaine (of the Victorian Chapter), "advising that there was no objection to Gropius visiting

11 Cited in Michael Bogle, "Arthur Baldwinson: Regional Modernism in Sydney 1937-1969," (PhD thesis, RMIT University, 2008), 527.

12 Helen O'Neill, *A Singular Vision: Harry Seidler* (Sydney: Harper Collins, 2013), 142.

13 Alice Spigelman, *Almost Full Circle: Harry Seidler* (Rose Bay, NSW: Brandt & Schlesinger, 2001), 195.

14 O'Neill, *A Singular Vision*, 140.

15 Royal Australian Institute of Architects New South Wales Chapter, Minutes of Convention Organising Committee, 23 March 1953.

16 Royal Australian Institute of Architects New South Wales Chapter, Minutes of Convention Organising Committee, 14 September 1953.

17 Royal Australian Institute of Architects New South Wales Chapter, Minutes of Convention Organising Committee, 13 October 1953.

18 *Cross-Section* 14 (December 1953): unpaginated. It appears that it was Robin Boyd who telephoned Gropius on behalf of *Cross-Section*. See Geoffrey Serle, *Robin Boyd: A Life* (Melbourne University Press, 1996), 159.

19 Royal Australian Institute of Architects New South Wales Chapter, Minutes of Convention Organising Committee, 18 January 1954.

Melbourne after the Convention, and that if Gropius were to visit Melbourne before, the invitation to him would be withdrawn.”²⁰

Meanwhile, extensive arrangements for the convention continued, with five sub-committees appointed: Accommodation and Entertainments, Exhibitions, Public Relations, Technical and Educational and Women’s Social. The one with the most expansive brief was Exhibitions. It was chaired by Arthur Baldwinson and its members included Harry Seidler and another prominent modern architect, Sydney Ancher. Baldwinson’s sub-committee was charged with organising an extensive range of supportive events for different locations around the city that would not only draw attention to the convention but also illustrate “the advantages which accrue to both the individual and the nation as a whole from sound, well-designed development.”²¹ By the time of the convention, the National Art Gallery [Art Gallery of New South Wales], the Mitchell Library and the Gallery at David Jones’ department store had all agreed to host exhibitions on architectural themes to coincide with the event. The largest and most resource intensive was the Architectural and Building Exhibition planned for Sydney Town Hall in the city’s centre. Thirty-six percent of the overall budget for the convention was to be spent on this exhibition.²² The cost of transforming the basement of Town Hall for the exhibition alone was reported in the press to be £11,900.²³

In the latter half of 1953, the Exhibitions Sub-committee appointed Seidler as “executive architect for the exhibition.”²⁴ Ultimately this was to comprise a number of displays: work by NSW architects (including “a special exhibit illustrating and stressing the service an architect renders to his client and the public”),²⁵ the winning entries of a national competition for an ideal Australian home, as well as displays by suppliers of building materials and equipment. The main attraction however was to be a full-size prefabricated house, designed by Seidler. It had been agreed by the COC that an “Experimental House” would be “the most suitable subject for exhibition in the Town Hall”, given “the undoubted public demand for houses” and “that an experimental house of to-morrow would be of the most interest to the general public.”²⁶ Another obvious imperative was the opportunity to pay homage to Gropius, a long-time advocate of the social and economic benefits of creatively designed prefabricated housing - despite the fact that his recent experience of designing house types for production had ended in failure.²⁷ In fact, O’Neill’s biography records that Seidler designed the

20 Royal Australian Institute of Architects New South Wales Chapter, Minutes of Convention Organising Committee, 18 January 1954.

21 H. Ingham Ashworth, “Fourth Australian Architectural Convention, 1954,” *Architecture* 42, no. 1 (January-March 1954): 9

22 In a budget submitted to the Convention Organising Committee in February 1954, estimated expenditure for the Convention was put at £24,814, £9000 of which was to be spent on “exhibition”. Royal Australian Institute of Architects New South Wales Chapter, Minutes of Convention Organising Committee, 15 February 1954.

23 *Daily Telegraph*, 10 May 1954, 17.

24 Royal Australian Institute of Architects New South Wales Chapter, Minutes of Convention Organising Committee, 14 September 1953.

25 Ashworth, “Fourth Australian Architectural Convention, 1954,” 9.

26 Royal Australian Institute of Architects New South Wales Chapter, Minutes of Convention Organising Committee, 13 October 1953.

27 For details of Gropius’ relationship with the General Panel Corporation of California, see Gilbert Herbert, *The Dream of the Factory-Made House: Walter Gropius and Konrad Wachsmann* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1984).

house "for Gropius ... in line with his mentor's belief" in the economy and efficiency of prefabricated structures.²⁸

By August 1953 it had become obvious that in order to successfully achieve the desired level of public exposure for the event, the COC was going to require professional assistance.²⁹ To this end, the Chapter secured the services of Asher Joel, one of Sydney's leading public relations consultants. Joel had an impressive record of overseeing and publicising high profile events - including New South Wales' celebrations of George VI's coronation and Australia's 150th Anniversary. To employ someone of Joel's stature clearly reflects the ambitions held for the event.

The Event and its Media Coverage

The Fourth Australian Architectural Convention was formally opened at the Hotel Australia on Monday 10 May by His Excellency, Lieut-General Sir John Northcott, Governor of New South Wales.

Technically the event ran over seven days, Sunday 9 May to Saturday 15 May, but the first day was devoted to registration and church services and the last to "Private entertainment". The printed programme included a welcome by Ashworth, advising the delegates that "The first consideration of those responsible for the organisation of this programme has been the dissemination of knowledge of the most recent advances in architectural thought, design and techniques."³⁰ Nevertheless, only eight papers were presented over the course of the week, as "relaxation and fraternisation" was also high on the agenda. Of those papers, the international guests - Walter Gropius and Robert Matthew - presented half: "Scope of Total Architecture" and "Is there a Science of Design?" by Gropius, and "General Conspectus of Recent Developments in Building in the United Kingdom with Particular Reference to Materials and Construction" and "Schools" by Matthew. The other speakers were scientist, Dr Ian Clunies-Ross on the "Science of Living", J. M. Newson, of the NSW Government Architects Office, talking on the implications of the housing shortage,³¹ Melbourne architect and educator John F. D. Scarborough on "Architecture Seen at Home" and Denis Winston, Professor of Town and Country Planning at the University of Sydney, on "A Great City: What makes a city 'great?'".

The formal ceremonies associated with the main public event, the Architectural and Building exhibition, occurred on the third day of the convention with the Lord Mayor of Sydney, Alderman P. D. Hills officiating. It had been open to the public since the Monday, with an admission charge of 2 shillings for adults and children under 14 admitted free. As anticipated, the centrepiece of the display was Harry Seidler's House of the Future. Prefabricated in the Armco Factory at Sutherland in Sydney, had been constructed on site in one day by four men. The walls and roof comprised

28 O'Neill, *A Singular Vision*, 142.

29 Royal Australian Institute of Architects New South Wales Chapter, Minutes of Convention Organising Committee, 24 August 1953. Initially, Mr E. Axford of the *Sydney Morning Herald* was to be appointed Public Relations Officer.

30 *Fourth Australian Architectural Convention 1954*, convention programme (Sydney: New South Wales Chapter, RAlA, 1954).

31 See *Sydney Morning Herald*, "Housing Need Estimate," 14 May 1954, 5.

interlocking 20-gauge zinc-anneal panels attached to steel columns and open web beams. Rectangular in plan, and measuring only 740 square feet (68.7 square metres), the House of the Future accommodated a combined living-dining room, kitchen, laundry, bathroom and bedroom. To offset the small footprint, Seidler introduced a glass wall down the full length of one long side. He also provided drawings to illustrate how this “nucleus” could easily be extended to accommodate the growing requirements of a household. An additional panel display, entitled: “The Story of Modern Architecture”, expounded “the new structural possibilities” inherent in modern architecture as well as Seidler’s opinions regarding the poor state of local housing design and his belief that “low cost housing lies in increased industrialisation.”³²

In the advertisement placed by the NSW Chapter in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the Town Hall exhibition was touted as “The most outstanding and fascinating exhibition of building and architecture presented in Australia.”³³ The House of the Future, “designed for to-morrow’s living”, was described as “[c]ontroversial, but practical, it must be seen to be believed.” The tenor of the advertising was personally reinforced by the Chair of the COC who was happy to advise the press that the design of the house “will certainly be provocative, and will probably bring down a storm of controversy on our heads, but we want it to be different from the usual houses being built today.”³⁴

While immensely respectful, and at times star-struck, the publicity surrounding the Chapter’s key international speaker also had a distinct undercurrent of controversy - even prior to the convention’s commencement. Both the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Daily Telegraph* published articles on the couple³⁵ following the press conference held on the day of their arrival. The *Herald’s* main article “Building Design ‘Should be Free’” began: “One of the world’s leading architects, Professor Walter Gropius, yesterday criticised the role played by local government in Australia in controlling building design.”³⁶ Also, as a nice foreground to the convention’s exhibition centrepiece, the piece went on to discuss Gropius’ belief that “[p]refabrication of building components was the secret of ‘better quality, cheaper and more beautiful homes.’” The *Telegraph’s* article headed “Prof. Opposes Restrictions” was almost identical in character, with Gropius’ key messages reported to be: “Local governing bodies should not tell architects the kind of houses they should build” and “the next big step forward in home building would be mass production of home-building components

32 Harry Seidler, “The Story of Modern Architecture,” display panel text for Architecture and Building Exhibition, Sydney Town Hall, 1954. In possession of Harry Seidler Associates.

33 Advertisement, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 May 1954, 11.

34 Unsourced article from a copy of Harry Seidler’s scrapbook, held by Sydney Living Museums.

35 The first substantial newspaper article appeared on the day of Walter and Ise Gropius’ arrival in the Australia, 3 May - but not in Sydney. Neil Clerehan, who was then Director of the Small Homes Service in Victoria, had devoted his weekly column in Melbourne’s *Age* to the man he considered to be “the world’s most famous living architect” under the rather misleading title “Gropius in Melbourne,” *Age*, 3 May 1954, 6.

36 *Sydney Morning Herald*, “Building Design ‘Should Be Free,’” 4 May 1954, 7. An interview with Ise Gropius featured in the same issue, albeit in the social pages, where her role in editing Gropius’ recently published *Scope of Total Architecture* was acknowledged: *Sydney Morning Herald*, “Architect to Visit the Plants and the Animals,” 4 May 1954, 9.

which could be assembled in innumerable designs.”³⁷ The script could have been written by Seidler himself - who happened to be in attendance at the press conference. Not only was Seidler a strong advocate of prefabricated housing, but also publically critical of local building practices and regulations. His bitter disputes with various councils over a number of his residential projects had been played out in detail in the local newspapers, which in most cases were highly supportive of the “Young Fighter” and his cause.³⁸

More articles were to follow in the lead up to the convention, and their engagement with Gropius as a major figure of international significance is noteworthy. The *Daily Telegraph* for example devoted half a page to a “Personality” profile on Gropius by Dr Emery Barcs, the paper’s foreign affairs specialist. Barcs described the professor as “one of the greatest architects of our times” and, in an informed way traced the progress of Gropius’ career and his influence on twentieth century architecture.³⁹ Not to be outdone, that same day the *Sydney Morning Herald* published a long article on page two, entitled “Visiting Architect Was Father of Modern Design.”⁴⁰ Though without an author, the piece was in fact written by Robin Boyd⁴¹ and republished from the University of Sydney’s *Current Affairs Bulletin* on the basis that Gropius considered the article “the best ever written on my work.”⁴² In addition to providing a biographical overview, Boyd focussed on Gropius’ modernist commitment to architecture as “a collective activity” and his significance to the course of twentieth century architecture: “He took the loose ends of revolutionary thought in the years following the first World War, gave them direction, tamed them without dulling them and tied them into a movement which has circled the world.”

The day before the convention’s official opening, Gropius was invited to speak on the question “Can Australia Develop Her Own Form of Architecture?” on ABC Radio. While still equating modern design with “social progress and with the development of our new means of production”, Gropius took care to provide a balanced response, acknowledging that Australia was in the same position as “all civilised countries that had gone through the inevitable social revolution of our period” being “faced with this same central cultural problem of how they may regain - with contemporary means - that unity and beauty of pre-machine cultures lost in the industrial upheaval.”⁴³ The following day the *Daily Telegraph* published his speech along with a six-page “Architectural Supplement” devoted to the convention and issues related to contemporary architecture.⁴⁴ Concurrently, the *Sydney Morning*

37 *Daily Telegraph*, “Prof. Opposes Restrictions,” 4 May 1954, 2.

38 See for example Keith Newman, “Another K. O by Young Fighter,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 March 1952, 9.

39 Emery Barcs, “Gropius: A Father of Modern Architecture,” *Daily Telegraph*, 8 May 1954, 19.

40 *Sydney Morning Herald*, “Visiting Architect Was Father of Modern Design,” 8 May 1954, 2.

41 Serle, *Robin Boyd*, 159.

42 *Sydney Morning Herald*, “Visiting Architect Was Father of Modern Design,” 2. For discussion of Robin Boyd’s relationship with Walter Gropius see Philip Goad, “Robin Boyd and the Post-War ‘Japanization of Western Ideas,’” *Architectural Theory Review* 1, no. 2 (1996): 110-20. See also “The Boyd/Gropius Letters,” *Transition* 38, Special Issue Robin Boyd (1992): 119-31.

43 Walter Gropius, “Can Australia Develop Her own Form of Architecture?,” *Daily Telegraph*, 10 May 1954, 8.

44 *Daily Telegraph*, 10 May 1954.

Herald opened with an editorial “Modern Architecture Comes to Australia” that described the phenomenon as “the acceptance of new techniques and materials, as Dr. Gropius taught many years ago, and the adaptation of design to modern needs and modern life.”⁴⁵ The edition also included a special sixteen-page “Architectural and Building Supplement: A survey of architecture and building at home and abroad to mark the fourth Australian Architectural Convention.” Including articles by H. Ingham Ashworth, Denis Winston, Robin Boyd and Roy Grounds, the supplement also featured a piece by Gropius entitled “We must Stop Borrowing Beauty From the Past” in which he argued for the adoption of a modern aesthetic in the design of public buildings.⁴⁶

The media coverage generated by the convention and its supportive programme of activities was substantial overall,⁴⁷ but ultimately, it was Walter Gropius and the project of his one-time student, Harry Seidler that excited the most attention. According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, “The presence of Dr. Gropius, who is to international architecture what Einstein is to nuclear physics, has completely dominated the convention.”⁴⁸ Seidler’s “controversial” and “provocative” House of the Future was extensively covered and in fact elicited a very sympathetic response from the press, especially *The Australian Women’s Weekly*, which sponsored the project, and its affiliate the *Daily Telegraph*. Both promoted Seidler’s design as a serious attempt to meet the housing shortage⁴⁹ with emphasis placed on the way in which the design demonstrated the unrealized potential of prefabrication: “The house bears no resemblance to typical ‘pre-fab’ houses, which sometimes are small and dingy and have a depressing sameness.”⁵⁰ The ways in which existing building regulations inhibited such valiant attempts was also noted.⁵¹

It is interesting to compare the level of coverage that Gropius and the convention received in the popular press with that provided by architectural periodicals of the period. There was certainly consensus as to the significance of the event as a whole. *Cross-Section* described it as “the Convention to end all Conventions”⁵² while *Architecture and Arts* deemed the Architectural and Building exhibition to be “the most exciting and influential ... ever to be held in Australia.”⁵³ As for the RAI’s own journal, the Sydney-edited *Architecture*, it focussed on producing a special edition in

45 *Sydney Morning Herald*, “Modern Architecture Comes to Australia,” 10 May 1954, 2.

46 Walter Gropius, “We Must Stop Borrowing Beauty From The Past,” *Sydney Morning Herald Architectural and Building Supplement*, 10 May 1954, 3.

47 The social pages of both the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Daily Telegraph*, for example, were liberally sprinkled with images of delegates and their wives during the first days of the convention, which even allowed some discussion of women in the profession. ABC radio provided further coverage by broadcasting two half-hour talks and a forum debate by four “leading architects.” See for example *Sydney Morning Herald*, “Practising Women Architects,” 14 May 1954, 13 and *Daily Telegraph*, “Convention in Sydney for 300 Delegates,” 10 May 1954, 15.

48 *Sydney Morning Herald*, “Architects Exchange Ideas at High-speed Convention,” 15 May 1954, 2.

49 *Australian Women’s Weekly*, “The Australian Women’s Weekly House of the Future,” 5 May 1954, 32; *Sunday Telegraph*, “House of Future’ on Show Tomorrow,” 9 May 1954, 11.

50 *Sunday Telegraph*, “‘House of the Future’ on Show Tomorrow,” 11.

51 *Daily Telegraph*, “Show House all Made in Factory,” 10 May 1954, 19.

52 *Cross-Section* 20 (June 1954): np.

53 “RAIA Convention,” *Architecture and Arts* 11 (June 1954): 11-12.

April-June to support the convention that presented photographic essays on "Australia Yesterday" and "Australia Today."⁵⁴ The latter opened with recent domestic architecture, "Buildings for Living," which took the lion's share of the publication. *Architecture's* July-September edition⁵⁵ provided a detailed report on the convention's programme, its delegates, opening, exhibitions and social functions as well as brief summaries of all the papers presented. But whereas the popular press had attempted to identify Gropius' particular contribution to the convention and to engage with his expressed philosophy and ideas, *Architecture* did surprisingly little in this regard. Certainly Gropius' second paper "Is there a Science of Design?" was published in full in this edition - but without any editorial comment or analysis.

Even within the constraints of its tiny format, Melbourne's *Cross-Section* was able to provide more of an insight into the atmosphere of the convention and the interest that attended Gropius' presence.⁵⁶ So too the building journal *Building Lighting Engineering* devoted a large chunk of its May edition to the convention and exhibition. This included not only a one-page profile on Gropius but also detailed discussion of each of his two papers.⁵⁷ Perhaps the most considered response to Gropius' visit was provided by Melbourne's *Architecture and Arts*. The editorial of its June edition was entitled "Thoughts on Professor Gropius' Visit to Sydney."⁵⁸ Written by the talented Sydney writer and architect Eva Buhrich, it emphasised how important it was to have heard Gropius in person and how this had served to dispel the notion that his position was narrowly functionalist: "listening to Gropius made us realize that there are no poles; that to Gropius as much as to Frank Lloyd Wright emotionally and organically balanced living is the important aim, not utility and function which are self-understood in any case."⁵⁹ But the editorial also included comment on what Buhrich saw as the insular nature of the audience for the convention's programme of speakers - "Architects only - for the public was not invited" - and the irony of Gropius being awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Sydney "whose architectural school has never excelled in audacity and realization of contemporary architectural values... Let's hope that this implies that the spirit and ideas of the Bauhaus will in future permeate the stately halls and the stately gentlemen of our architectural school."⁶⁰ Buhrich's scepticism as to reception of Gropius's ideas, particularly within the more conservative elements of the local profession, was not echoed in any of the reports recorded in *Architecture*.

54 *Architecture* 42, no. 2 (April-June 1954).

55 "Fourth Australian Architectural Convention," *Architecture* 42, no 3 (July-September 1954): 130-31.

56 *Cross-Section* 20 (June 1954): np.

57 "The Architectural Convention," *Building Lighting Engineering*, (May 1954): 18-34.

58 Eva Buhrich, "Thoughts on Professor Gropius' Visit to Sydney," *Architecture and Arts* 11 (June 1954): 21.

59 For discussion of the particular significance of Walter Gropius and Frank Lloyd Wright to *Architecture and Arts*, see Paul Hogben, "Architecture and Arts and the Mediation of American Architecture in Post-war Australia," *Fabrications* 22, no. 1 (June 2012): 30-57.

60 Buhrich, "Thoughts on Professor Gropius' Visit to Sydney."

After the Event

After Walter Gropius received the first honorary doctorate of science awarded by the University of Sydney's Faculty of Architecture and presented his final paper to a packed audience in the university's Great Hall, he and wife Ise left Sydney for Melbourne. There the couple was hosted by Roy Grounds, Robin Boyd and Frederick Romberg, one of the most significant architectural partnerships of the period, and were able to meet up with Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack. The three-day visit was low-key, involving personal tours and informal gatherings,⁶¹ with little interest shown from the local press. Neil Clerehan however did manage to publish one of Gropius' house designs in his Small Homes Section the day after the couple left for Japan. Clerehan drew particular attention to the house's timber frame - in America there is "no prejudice as we know it here against timber in favour of brick construction" - and its compact plan - "No council would accept his bathroom and toilet arrangement (no Airlock)."⁶² *Cross-Section* cheekily reported one reader's response to Clerehan's article "We are very interested in the Walter Gropius plan ... It would be just right for us providing we can find someone to make the outside look like a country house instead of a suburban villa."⁶³

The NSW Chapter was delighted with the level of public interest in the convention and its supportive programme of events, though its reported opinion in the *Daily Telegraph* was rather low key: "[The aim of the Convention] was twofold: to provide architects with an opportunity to meet socially; and to disseminate, both within the Profession and amongst the general public, information of the latest architectural thought, design, planning, and techniques. Both these functions were amply fulfilled."⁶⁴

Privately, however, it considered the event to be "[b]y far the largest and most important activity undertaken by the Chapter" and "the most successful Architectural Convention" held.⁶⁵ In addition to all the media coverage generated by the event and its famous guest speaker, public interest could be gauged by the number of people who paid to enter the Architectural and Building Exhibition at Sydney Town Hall. And those figures were impressive. During the course of the opening day alone, it was estimated that 8000 people visited the exhibition.⁶⁶ The House of the Future was a particular draw card, the *Daily Telegraph* reporting that "From 6.30pm until closing time at 10pm people formed a queue to pass through the home."⁶⁷ The exhibition ran until 25 May, extending beyond the convention by fifteen days, and was open daily from 9.30am to 10.00pm. By the end of the exhibition, visitor numbers were estimated to be 42,000.⁶⁸

61 Serle, *Robin Boyd*, 159-60.

62 *Age*, "Lesson for Beginners," 10 May 1954, 6.

63 *Cross-Section* 20 (June 1954): np.

64 *Daily Telegraph*, "8000 Flock to Display," 11 May 1954, 9.

65 *The Royal Australian Institute of Architects New South Wales Chapter Annual Report*, October 1954.

66 "The Architectural Convention," *Building Lighting Engineering*, 23.

67 *Daily Telegraph*, "8000 Flock to Display," 9.

68 *The Royal Australian Institute of Architects New South Wales Chapter Annual Report*, October 1954.

Part of the convention had included the RAlA's Annual General Meeting where a new national president was elected – E. J. A. (Jim) Weller from Queensland. His reflections on the significance of the event included a novel interpretation of the central theme of Gropius' keynote address:

“But this concept of total architecture must go further – it must imply a profession understood for its capacity...It means, perhaps, that architects in their professional associations should not wait to be discovered, but should instead exhibit their wares and air their views. That is what we have been about with our conventions and our exhibitions. The spectacular trappings which glorify these occasions and publicise their being are not fundamental to a convention, but they are important in the realm of public relations.”⁶⁹

Perhaps for some within the RAlA, Walter Gropius' most important contribution to the Fourth Australian Architectural Convention was as one of those “spectacular trappings”.

Conclusion

It is difficult to ascertain the true impact of Walter Gropius' presence in Australia in 1954. From interviewing Harry Seidler for his biography some decades later, Spigelman concluded that “Gropius's visit did not capture many people's imagination, and Seidler was disappointed with his former teacher's reception: ‘People couldn't cope with modern architecture then, and by and large they still can't.’”⁷⁰ In terms of the popular press at least, the sheer amount of coverage Gropius received during his visit, and most importantly its tenor, would appear to contradict that assertion. In fact, it was the popular press that served to translate Gropius' expressed opinions into tacit support for local architects such as Seidler who were most closely aligned with “progressive” ideals and particularly a reformist agenda in relation to housing.

With regard to the architectural press, Paul Hogben has demonstrated the ways in which at least one journal, *Architecture and Arts*, continued to actively engage with Gropius' discourse for years following his visit.⁷¹ However, as suggested by Buhrich and reflected in the editorial direction of the RAlA's own journal, there were significant elements within the profession that were largely immune to Gropius, his theories and opinions. For them perhaps, his greatest value as a participant in the Fourth Australian Architectural Convention, lay in his ability to generate an unprecedented level of publicity for the RAlA, its NSW Chapter and the local profession generally.

My sincere thanks to Dr Noni Boyd for her generous assistance in providing access to the records of the NSW Chapter of the Australian Institute of Architects and to Dr Paul Hogben for alerting me to a number of key references.

69 EJA Weller, “The President's Letter,” *Architecture* 42, no. 3 (July–September 1954): 112.

70 Spigelman, *Almost Full Circle*, 196.

71 Hogben, “*Architecture and Arts* and the Mediation of American Architecture in Post-war Australia,” 35–36.