

ULTRA

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Image: Michaelmore, Roeger & Russell, *Chester House*, Belair 1966, State Library of South Australia BRG 346/28/6/2.

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The Making of a Newcastle Modernist: The Early House Designs of Sydney C. Morton

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Keywords

Architectural Modernism
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Abstract

In his article series "Modern Homes of Newcastle", published in the *Newcastle Morning Herald* between 1961 and 1964, journalist Alan Farrelly wrote about the contemporary domestic architecture of Newcastle and its surrounds and in doing so brought public attention to the work of a generation of the city's younger architects. Prominent amongst these was Sydney Charles Morton who had four houses of his own design featured in the series. These houses stand out for their bold modernist appearance involving stark rectilinear forms, light-weight construction, flat roofs and large amounts of glazing. For readers of the newspaper, they were an illustration of how far residential design in their region had come.

This paper looks at the pre-history of these houses in the early domestic work of Morton which included the design of 'Orana', or what locally became known as "the chicken coop". In the context of early 1950s Newcastle, where pitched roof, brick and tile homes were standard, 'Orana' certainly represented a radical departure and rethinking of the modern house. Like that of many of his generation, Morton's work, and in particular his breakthrough project in 'Orana', occupies a position of 'ultra' defiance against convention. The aim of this paper is to understand how this position developed and grew in strength within his time as a student at Sydney Technical College and within his early practice.

Introduction

1. For a study of this article series see Paul Hogben, "Unlocking Newcastle's Modernist Domestic Architecture," in *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand: 37, What If? What Next? Speculations on History's Futures*, edited by Kate Hislop and Hannah Lewi (Perth: SAHANZ, 2020): 111-123.

In his article series "Modern Homes of Newcastle", published in the *Newcastle Morning Herald* between 1961 and 1964, journalist Alan Farrelly wrote about the contemporary domestic architecture of Newcastle and its surrounds and in doing so brought public attention to the work of a generation of the city's younger architects.¹ Prominent amongst these was Sydney Charles Morton who had four houses of his own design featured in the series. These houses stand out for their bold modernist appearance involving stark rectilinear forms, light-weight construction, flat roofs and large amounts of glazing. Three of the houses are dramatically cantilevered over their sites to maximise views towards coastlines or over the city (Figure 1). Their internal planning is compact with kitchen and dining rooms separated by semi-suspended serveries or shelf units. The external walls consisted of either vertical weatherboards or fibrous cement panelling. Asbestos cement was used for the roofing. For the newspaper's readers, these houses were an illustration of how far residential design in their region had come, where steep sites were not considered an impediment to achieving a contemporary setting for modern living.

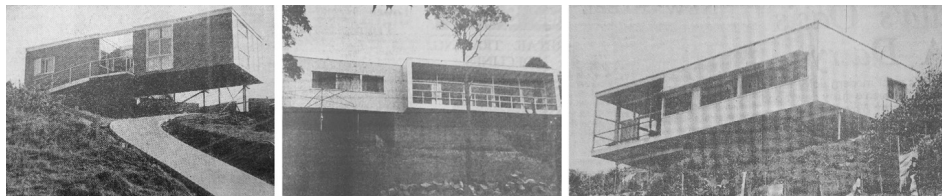


Figure 1: Houses designed by Sydney Morton and featured in the "Modern Homes of Newcastle" series published in the *Newcastle Morning Herald*.

Sources: Left: *Newcastle Morning Herald*, 12 August 1961, 7; Centre: *Newcastle Morning Herald*, 9 September 1961, 7; Right: *Newcastle Morning Herald*, 12 January 1962, 6. Courtesy of Newcastle Herald/ACM.

2. The seminal reference for the architectural history of Newcastle and the broader Hunter region is Les Reedman's *Early Architects of the Hunter Region: A Hundred Years to 1940* (Brooklyn, NSW: Les Reedman and Margaret Walker, 2008). As the title indicates, this book does not address the post-war period.

3. *RAIA Newcastle Division Newsletter*, October 1998.

4. Bob Donaldson and Don Morris, *Architecture Newcastle: Preserving its Educational History, A History of Architectural Education at Newcastle* (Newcastle: Bob Donaldson and Don Morris, 2001), 17, 24.

5. *Ibid.*, 193, 196.

Like his fellow Novocastrians who began practice in the years after the war, little is known of Morton's architectural career and output.² An obituary by Nina Walmsley published in October 1998 tells of the place and reputation he had within the post-war Newcastle profession:

Some of Newcastle's great homes and flat buildings came out of Syd's office at that time including the then infamous "chicken coop" on Bruncker Road, Adamstown Many of Newcastle's architects worked for Syd whilst they were students and brought to the office extraordinary skills which were tempered and matured by Syd's experience and technical finesse.³

Morton also features in Bob Donaldson and Don Morris' history of architectural education at the University of Newcastle in which he is named as one of the Newcastle students who joined the architectural diploma course at Sydney Technical College in the late 1930s.⁴ Donaldson and Morris' book includes illustrations of some of Morton's student projects and records his later contribution as a staff member of the school of architecture at the University of Newcastle in the area of building construction.⁵

As suggested by Farrelly and Walmsley, Morton had a strong presence

6. "Big Windows Feature in New Home," *Newcastle Morning Herald*, 10 July 1953, 4.

7. David Nash, "Orana - An Australian Welcome for a Polynesian Word?" *Placenames Australia: Newsletter of the Australian National Placenames Survey* (June 2016): 1, 5-8.

within the Newcastle architectural scene for his domestic work. One of his earliest commissions was a house design for Vera and William James on a site in Adamstown Heights in Newcastle. Nearing its completion in July 1953, the house gained the attention of the *Newcastle Morning Herald* for its modernity, in particular the large amount of window glazing and for its "Californian style".⁶ Locally, it was given the nickname "the chicken coop" presumably because of its elevated timbered volume and ramp entry. A 1955 photograph of the house displays the word 'Orana', a term possibly derived from 'Kia orāna', a common greeting within the Polynesian language used on the island of Rarotonga (Figure 2).⁷ Orana is also the name of a region in central western New South Wales. This paper will return to this house in more detail in a later section.



Figure 2: 'Orana', Adamstown Heights, Newcastle, NSW.
Source: State Library of New South Wales, Home and Away – 28233 (photo: 16/8/1955).

The present study seeks to understand the manner in which Morton developed such a strong devotion to modernism in the area of domestic architecture. In his practice he designed other types of buildings, but residential design was his most visible. The paper considers Morton's contact with the office of Castleden & Sara as an articulated pupil in the late 1930s and the likely influence this had on his architectural formation. It then examines how his work as a student at Sydney Technical College expressed a modernist sensibility in relation to domestic architecture. The paper then turns to his early residential commissions, built and unbuilt, as a practitioner in Newcastle in the early 1950s as post-war building restrictions were lifted.

This study was made possible due to the collection of Morton's drawings held by the Auchmuty Library at the University of Newcastle.⁸ These drawings date from 1934 to 1975, with the majority concentrated on his student work and project commissions of the 1950s and early 1960s.⁹ The secondary literature cites two interviews that were held with Morton, one by Les Reedman in 1994 and another by Don Morris in 1996.¹⁰ Unfortunately records of these interviews have yet to be found,

8. The author would like to thank the staff of the Special Collections (Archives) department of the Auchmuty Library at the University of Newcastle for their assistance in accessing Morton's architectural drawings.

9. Two drawings, dated June and July 1934, were basic orthographic studies of a box and bracket, done while Morton attended Newcastle Central Junior Technical School.

10. See references in Reedman, *Early Architects of the Hunter Region*, 181, and Donaldson and Morris, *Architecture Newcastle*, 15.

as no doubt they would contain valuable content for a study of Morton's career.

Articles

11. Donaldson and Morris, *Architecture Newcastle*, 195.

12. See articles and reports on Sara's experience abroad: "Trend Abroad: Impressions of Newcastle Architect, Housing Improvements in Many Centres," *Newcastle Morning Herald*, 25 June 1937, 19; "Modern London: Mr. Sara's Impressions, Address to Business Men's Club," *Newcastle Morning Herald*, 7 October 1937, 5; "London's Stores: Mr Sara's Impressions," *Newcastle Morning Herald*, 25 November 1937, 5.

13. "Modern Residence, Completed at Hamilton," *Newcastle Morning Herald*, 4 February 1939, 20. Another feature that was noted were the "easy-folding" windows around the solarium.

14. See "New Residence, Parkway Street and Jenner Parade, Hamilton South, Newcastle, N.S.W.," *Construction*, 20 March 1940, 16.

15. "Trend Abroad," 19.

16. "Work in Progress," *Newcastle Morning Herald*, 18 November 1939, 22.

17. See "Shops and Flats in Hunter Street," *Newcastle Morning Herald*, 15 March 1941, 12; "Six Flats at Bar Beach," *Newcastle Morning Herald*, 22 March 1941, 2.

18. Reedman, *Early Architects of the Hunter Region*, 188, 252.

Sydney Morton was born in February 1921 in Mayfield, a suburb to the north-west of central Newcastle which, by the early 1920s, was home to a population of factory workers and their families. BHP steel works, Commonwealth Steel Products and John Lysaght & Co.'s manufacturing plant were nearby. Morton attended Broadmeadow Central Junior Technical School, which became Newcastle Central Junior Technical School in 1932. On completion of his schooling he worked for Commonwealth Steel and began to study engineering.¹¹ Deciding to pursue a career in architecture instead, he entered the office of Castleden & Sara as an articled pupil in the late 1930s. This was a great time for an aspiring architect to be involved with this practice. Sara had returned to Newcastle in June 1937 after eight years working in London and travelling through Europe where he encountered new thinking and was able to see examples of modernist architecture firsthand.¹² The influence of this experience was most visible in the residential commissions the practice undertook in the late 1930s, one of which was a large house for Mr. A. Fairhall on the corner of Parkway Street and Jenner Parade in Hamilton South. Described in the press as "following the modern Continental school of architecture", this flat-roofed, unadorned two-storey house featured a protruding semi-circular front section housing a solarium.¹³ Its walls were of exposed biscuit-toned bricks with rows of darker toned bricks for the parapets and copings.¹⁴ The use of warm yellow bricks in contrast with darker tiles was something Sara had admired in modern Dutch architecture.¹⁵

Castleden & Sara's will to adopt new approaches to the design and construction of residential buildings also encompassed the use of reinforced concrete for house foundations¹⁶ and an enthusiasm for new models of flat design.¹⁷ Talk of the contemporary architecture of London and Europe and being part of an architectural practice with a strong sense of moving with the times would have rubbed off on the young Morton. So too would have Sara's ethic of rigorous detailing and thoroughness of design documentation.¹⁸ This office experience however was only one part of Morton's early architectural formation. His studies at Sydney Technical College were another.

An Architectural Diploma

Sydney Technical College began offering its architectural diploma course to students living in Newcastle in 1926. At that time the course was five years of part-time study, with its early stages comprising subjects in building construction, construction drawing, architectural history, architectural drawing, freehand drawing, descriptive geometry and modelling. The opportunity to create original design schemes was offered in the later stages of the course. In 1933 an additional year was added, bringing the diploma to six years of part-time study. The early emphasis on building construction was a continuation of the tradition of technical college education which fostered practical knowledge and

19. Sydney Technical College had been established in 1878 as an outgrowth of the Sydney Mechanic's School of Arts. Some of its early graduates included Florence Taylor and William Hardy Wilson, and in the 1920s Emil Sodersten and Sydney Ancher. An integral part of the curriculum and philosophical approach of technical colleges, not just in Sydney but elsewhere, was the maintenance of the office article system as a necessary complement to a student's academic studies. For a historical outline of architectural instruction at Sydney Technical College see P. R. Proudfoot, "The Development of Architectural Education in Sydney, 1880-1930," *Australian Historical Studies*, 21, no. 83 (October 1981): 197-211.

20. Reedman, *Early Architects of the Hunter Region*, 50.

21. Pitt was in partnership with E. H. R. Merewether and enjoyed an influx of work in the area of hotel design and remodelling in the late 1920s and 1930s thanks to Tooth & Company. Jeater had returned to Newcastle from Sydney in 1925 having studied in England after the war and becoming an associate of the Royal Institute of British Architects. In Sydney he supervised the erection of the Manchester Unity Building (1923) by Tate & Young.

22. See "Cooperation in Making 'Wirraway': Attractive Block of Home Units," *Newcastle Sun*, 6 November 1939, 2. Cecil Hay's rendering of the building was a complete modernist vision. See "Imposing Block of Flats for the City," *Newcastle Moring Herald*, 25 February 1939, 20.

23. The construction drawing courses consisted of a string of studies of conventional building sections, components, materials and constructional systems, increasing in complexity of scale and technical depth from stage to stage.

24. See, for instance, the buildings identified by Robin Boyd in "Morningside Peninsula," *Architecture*, 38, no. 4 (October-December 1950): 148-151. For a study of the place of the holiday house in the propagation of architectural modernism in Sydney see Maryam Gusheh and Catherine Lassen, "Informal Modern: Holiday Houses," in *Leisure Space: The Transformation of Sydney 1945-1970*, edited by Paul Hogben and Judith O'Callaghan (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2014), 208-224.

skills as the basis for architectural thinking.¹⁹

For those who lived in Newcastle, the diploma course at Sydney Technical College was offered through the Newcastle Technical College within its Wood Street branch. As students progressed to more advanced levels they were required to travel to Sydney, by rail or passenger steamer, to attend classes there.²⁰ In 1927 Alexander Hutton Martin replaced Byera Hadley as Lecturer in Charge of the diploma course. Locally, two prominent Newcastle architects – Nigel B. Pitt and William D. Jeater – were appointed as instructors, with another locally-based teacher, illustrator Reg Russom, running the freehand drawing classes.²¹ In the mid-1930s Jeater teamed up with Frank Rodd and later Cecil Hay to lead one of Newcastle's largest practices. Like Castleden & Sara, Jeater, Rodd and Hay were interested in the modernisation of residential architecture, their most ambitious project of the late 1930s being the eight-storey 'Wirraway' block of home units at Ocean Beach in Newcastle. This was the most modern design of such a block that local construction could support, and incorporated advanced lighting, refrigeration and lift technology.²²

'Wirraway' would have been a significant case study for architectural students in Newcastle at the time, including Morton who joined the diploma course in 1939. His work within architectural history and construction courses displayed an aptitude for precision and fine detail. His construction drawings were extremely neat and thorough compositions demonstrating a sound grasp of material and technical properties.²³ Stage 3 of his studies, in 1941, provided Morton with an opportunity to undertake an architectural design subject. This consisted of a series of esquisse-like exercises and more elaborated design proposals for larger buildings. Here we can see Morton expressing an interest in modern architecture, where the situation permitted. His scheme for a Memorial Hall captured a functionalist aesthetic with its formal articulation of internal spaces, plain wall surfaces, simple fenestration, crisp detailing and use of bright colour.

The most telling example of Morton's interest in architectural modernism at this point however was his scheme for a 'Week-end Cottage at Lakeside' (Figure 3). For this he sharpened the curved corners of a more urban residential aesthetic and conceived the roof as an outdoor living space. His drawing suggests rendered walls rather than the use of exposed brick and the plan opens to a north-westerly aspect. Overall, the scheme was consistent with the way the weekender had become a liberated ground for simplified construction in Australia during the 1930s.²⁴

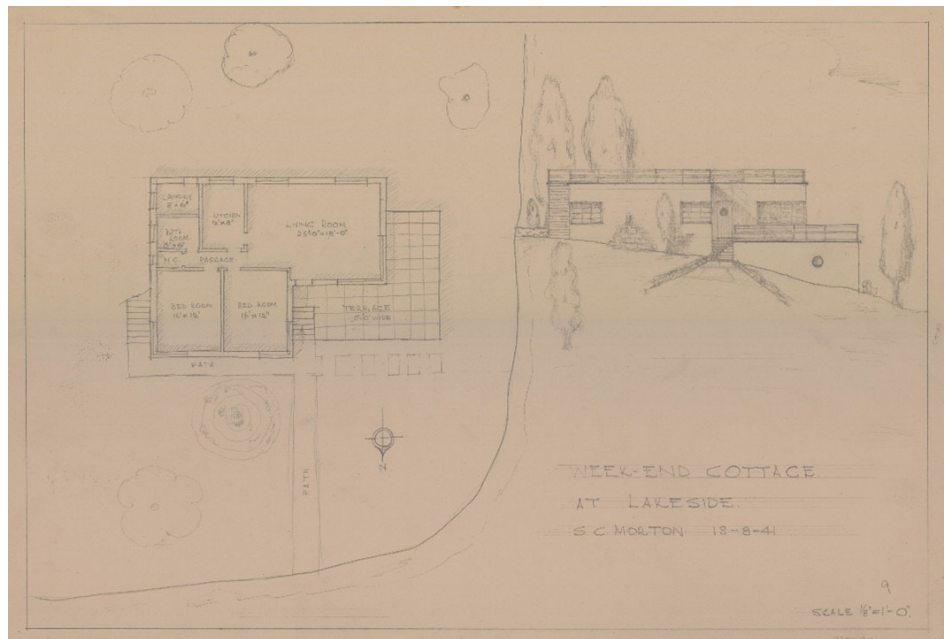


Figure 3: 'Week-end Cottage at Lakeside', Sydney C. Morton, 13 August 1941. Source: Auchmuty Library, University of Newcastle, Special Collections (Archives), Sydney Morton Architectural Drawings, MOR23.

Morton's studies at Sydney Technical College were suspended in late 1941 due to the war. Evidence suggests that Morton worked as an independent draftsman in the following years. He drew up plans for a garden of remembrance at Newcastle crematorium in Beresfield, dated September 1941, December 1942 and February 1943. In June 1945 he was commissioned by D. Colquhoun Esq. for the design of a residence in New Lambton for which he envisaged a pitched roof weatherboard construction.

On returning to his studies in 1945 Morton enrolled in a set of engineering courses, as these must have been the only options at the time. In March 1946 he was able to resume architectural design and building construction subjects, along with subjects in specification writing and town planning. One of his first design problems was the design of a Mountain Cabin. Morton conceived a structure that allowed the small building to extend beyond a retaining wall and project over the ground below (Figure 4). There is representation of material quality in the horizontal wall banding suggestive of timber slats and a concrete block retaining wall. The living room opens to a terrace (labelled an outdoor living area) through three glazed doors on the eastern side and another to the north. In tune with the informality of a mountain retreat, there is a spatial flow between the kitchen and living area.

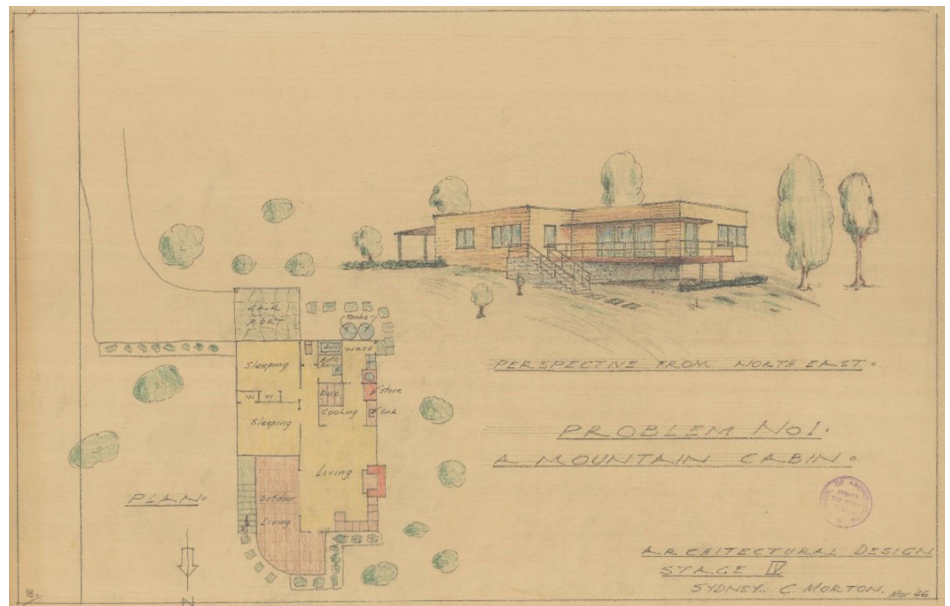


Figure 4: 'Problem No 1. A Mountain Cabin', Architectural Design Stage IV, Sydney C. Morton, March 1946.

Source: Auchmuty Library, University of Newcastle, Special Collections (Archives), Sydney Morton Architectural Drawings, MOR86 001.

Morton produced another scheme for a house in Stage 5 of this studies (Figure 5). This time the design consisted of elements of a more suburban type, located at the edge of a lake. The design shows a strong embrace of the northern orientation with the introduction of a glazed sleepout area lying between a patio and verandah. Despite the severity and exposure of the flat roof, the house is given a warmth through the light brown colour of its (block?) walls and soft yellow toning of the underside of its roof and eaves.

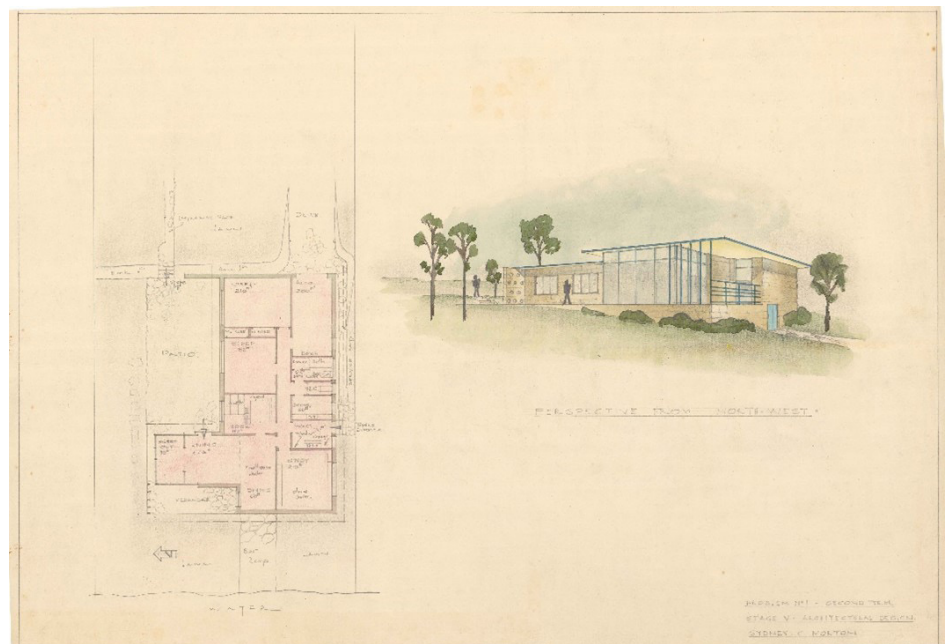


Figure 5: 'Problem No. 1', Second Term, Stage V, Architectural Design, Sydney C. Morton, May 1947.

Source: Auchmuty Library, University of Newcastle, Special Collections (Archives), Sydney Morton Architectural Drawings, MOR76.

The final stages of architectural design within the diploma course were framed as town planning problems where students had to conceive a range of buildings, their locations and relationships to each other. Morton was required to produce a plan for a hypothetical rural community settlement, a housing estate in Sydney and to reconfigure the 'Nine-Ways' junction within the suburb of Broadmeadow in Newcastle. Morton's scheme for the community settlement consisted of a gridded layout of 28 farmlets, each a regular five acres in size, and a front entry hub consisting of a community hall, handicrafts and library block, a shop and bulk store, and a service station. A consistent architectural language dictated the appearance of all the buildings within the estate scheme. The farmhouses follow a template design, altered to orientation. Simple in plan, each consisted of two-bedrooms (with the potential to add a third) and a decent sized living room that would open to a verandah through a window-wall and fully glazed doors (Figure 6). His drawings suggest timber-frame construction.

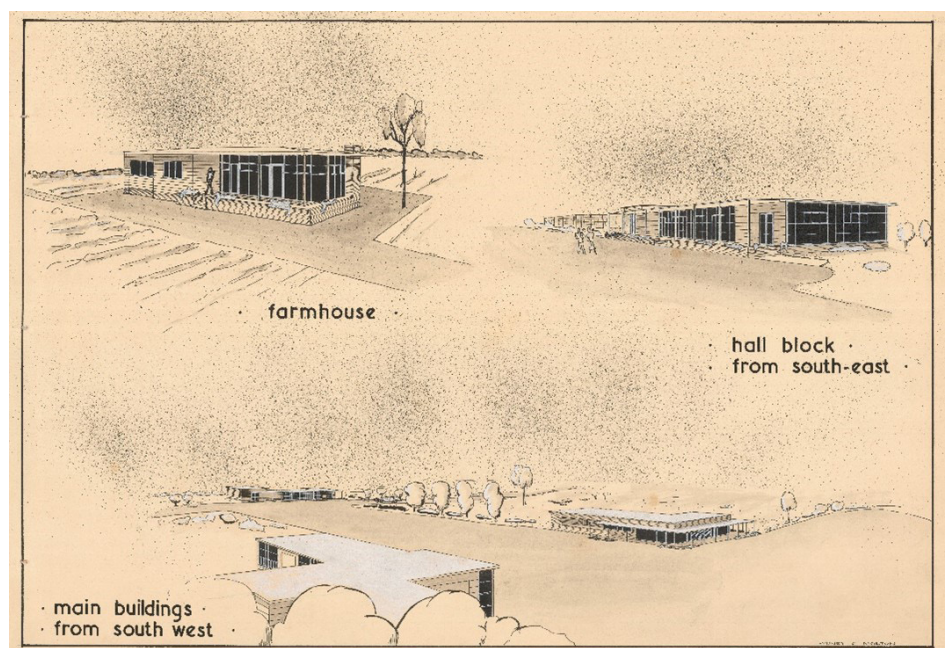


Figure 6: 'Third Term Problem: A Community Settlement', Sydney C. Morton, October 1947.

Source: Auchmuty Library, University of Newcastle, Special Collections (Archives), Sydney Morton Architectural Drawings, MOR67.

Morton's last student project to involve residential design was for a suburban housing estate along Anzac Parade in Sydney. This consisted of a gently curved set of streets and housing lots. A centrally placed shopping centre would provide amenity for the residents as would the treelined walkways and footpaths. The houses themselves would be similar in size, materiality and aesthetic quality (not too dissimilar to the farmhouses within his community settlement scheme). The idea was house construction that was modest, low cost and easily reproducible.

From this survey of Morton's student work we can see the development of an approach to domestic architecture that demonstrated a knowledge of modern planning ideas and construction technology. Planning was dictated by orientation to the northern sun. All the houses had flat or slightly angled roofs. There is a growing interest in light-

25. See "'Timber Homes' Competitions," *Journal of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects*, 36, no. 2 (May-June 1938): 64-71.

26. This exhibition, entitled 'Better Homes Exhibition', was organised by the newly-formed Modern Architectural Research Society of Sydney and the featured design schemes were selected from a competition among the Society's members. See "Modern Homes of Timber," *Australian Women's Weekly*, 15 July 1939, 5; "The Modern Architectural Research Society Display," *Architecture*, 28, no. 9 (September 1939): 195.

27. See Michael Bogle, "Arthur Baldwinson: Regional Modernism in Sydney 1937-1969" (PhD Dissertation, RMIT University, 2008), 169-178.

28. Among these were Walter Bunning's *Homes in the Sun* (Sydney: W. J. Nesbit, 1945) and *The Sun Post-war Homes*, Architects' Competition Designs (Melbourne: The Sun-News Pictorial, n.d.).

29. "Personnel," *Newcastle Morning Herald*, 6 April 1949, 2.

frame timber construction which was reflective of an enthusiasm for timber home construction that had emerged within architectural circles in Australia prior to the war. A driving force for this was the Timber Development Association of Victoria's heavily publicised 1938 'Timber Homes' competition which attracted entries from across Australia. Its aim was "to demonstrate the practical and aesthetic possibilities of timber construction in domestic architecture and to encourage research in new methods of timber construction in residential building."²⁵ An exhibition of drawings and models displaying the possibilities of timber in low-cost home construction was held at the David Jones Department Store Gallery in Sydney in July 1939.²⁶ As a prominent participant in the competition and contributor to the exhibition, Arthur Baldwinson would have some success in the realisation of timber home construction with the first of his Sydney buildings after arriving there from Melbourne: the Collins House at Palm Beach (1939) and the Kingsford-Smith House at Taylors Point (1940).²⁷ After war's end, there were several articles and publications that architectural students could consult on future home design in Australia in which they would find illustrations of new types of structure and construction, open plans and the incorporation of large amounts of glazing to connect indoor and outdoor living spaces.²⁸

On the completion of his studies in 1948, Morton graduated from the diploma course and was enrolled by the Board of Architects of New South Wales the following year.²⁹ As far as his overall performance went, Morton achieved Pass grades for design subjects but did better in construction studies. Even though in the eyes of his teachers his design work may not have been worthy of higher grades, it does testify to the progressive and imaginative outlook Morton possessed in relation to the creation of domestic architecture. This leads to the question: how did Morton put his progressive ideas into practice?

Post-war Commissions

30. "Attractive Brick Home as First Prize in Legacy Art Union," *Newcastle Morning Herald*, 14 February 1946, 6.

At some point after the war Morton returned to the office of Castleden & Sara. This provided him with an understanding of the way house design could continue to be modernised but within the limits of wartime building restrictions. For example, in early 1946 Castleden & Sara designed a brick veneer and tiled roof home as a prize in the Newcastle and Maitland Citizens' Legacy Art Union. Built in Merewether, this house was noteworthy because of the inclusion of a solarium which had windows that extended almost its entire wall height and a car garage housed under the same roof as the house.³⁰

By November 1950 Morton had set up his own practice, working from his home on Maud Street in Waratah. One of his first commissions was the design of a brick extension to a Presbyterian manse in Stewart Avenue, Hamilton. This was followed by the design of a house for Mr. J. Heaney in Bar Beach, the initial scheme of which featured an angled flat roof but which was changed to a tiled pitched timber roof structure. Square in plan, there was little scope to organise the interior spaces around more modern thinking, although in a later scheme for a weatherboard house for Mr A. Orr the living room occupied the centre of a square plan with bedrooms positioned directly alongside, without any passageways separating the two. Financially, Morton's early practice

was buoyed by work he undertook for Peter's Refrigeration Company in Newcastle. This involved extensions to its Darby Street factory including a sketch design for a new office block.

The largest design scheme Morton created in the early 1950s was for a proposed new ambulance station in Waratah. As a proposal, Morton used the opportunity to present a set of bold contemporary ideas for such a building. The scheme contained an abstract blade wall that projected above the entrance and a large double-storey block with a grid of glazed windows on its eastern elevation. There is no evidence to suggest that the proposal was developed and that the building was ever erected. However, it did signal Morton's readiness to strike out and to think in a radical way about the design of buildings for his city.

'Orana'

31. Morton's drawings for the house name 'Mrs V. C. James' as the client. Unfortunately, little is known of Vera Christina James at the time of writing this paper. She was born Vera Christina Sutton in Fullerton, New South Wales, in July 1890. She married William Hopkin James in Stockton in 1910 and the couple had five children over the next ten years. Vera lived in 'Orana' until 1972, the year before she died in August 1973.

Morton's opportunity to exercise and display his skills in progressive design and construction came in January 1952 with a commission from Vera Christina James for the design of a house on a site in Adamstown Heights at the corner of Yarrum Street and what was then the Pacific Highway.³¹ The lot ran east-west, which meant that the dwelling could be positioned to maximise exposure to the north. This is precisely what Morton did and planned the house to have its three bedrooms run down the northern side and its dining and living spaces enclosed by a large 486 square foot window wall that covered about half of the northern elevation (Figure 7). There would be two entries into the house, one along a path from the Pacific Highway which led into the house via a breakfast room, and the other which branched from the driveway along a ramp and into an entry hall and open (sun) area. The house would consist of two levels, the main level and a lower one housing a garage and laundry, an internal staircase linking the two. Morton's input also extended to the design of bedroom cabinetry and kitchen fittings. His construction drawings show a detailed consideration of the various window casements.

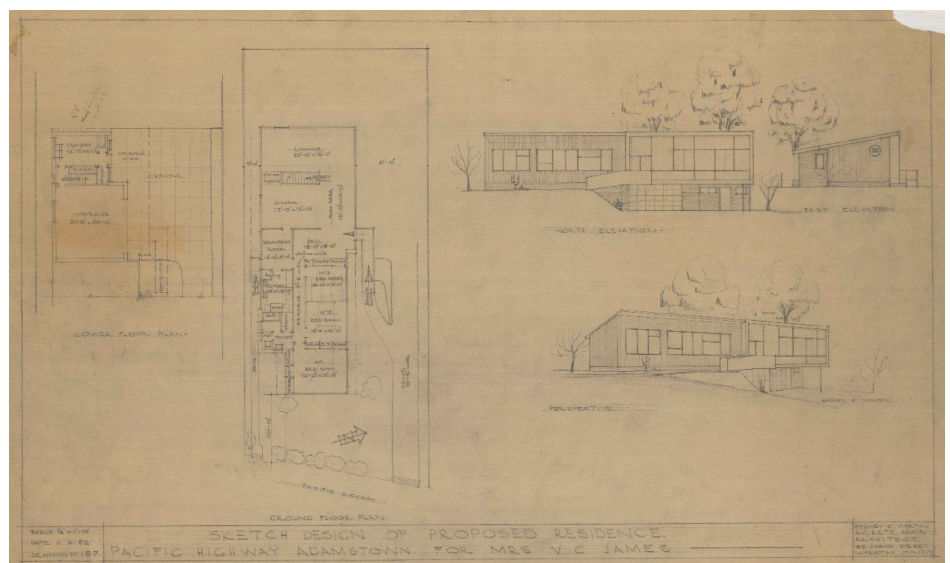


Figure 7: Sketch Design of Proposed Residence, Pacific Highway, Adamstown, for Mrs V. C. James, Sydney C. Morton, 11 March 1952.

Source: Auchmuty Library, University of Newcastle, Special Collections (Archives), Sydney Morton Architectural Drawings, MOR101-001.

32. "Big Windows Feature in New Home," 4.

33. "Opportunities for Business, New South Wales," *Construction*, 22 July 1953, 9.

Construction took place in the first half of 1953. External walls of the upper level were made of vertical pieces of stained red mahogany weatherboard and the angled roof, dipping to the south, was of corrugated asbestos. As mentioned earlier, the house attracted the attention of the *Newcastle Morning Herald* which ran an article that included a photographic image taken from the north-west showing how the house extended over the lower level and the partly suspended ramp (Figure 8). After describing its features, which included weatherboards placed vertically rather than in a more conventional horizontal manner, the article cited Morton as reportedly saying that "the house was designed on Californian lines because the Californian climate was similar to that in Australia."³² The house's "Californian Style" was also noted by the Sydney weekly *Construction*.³³

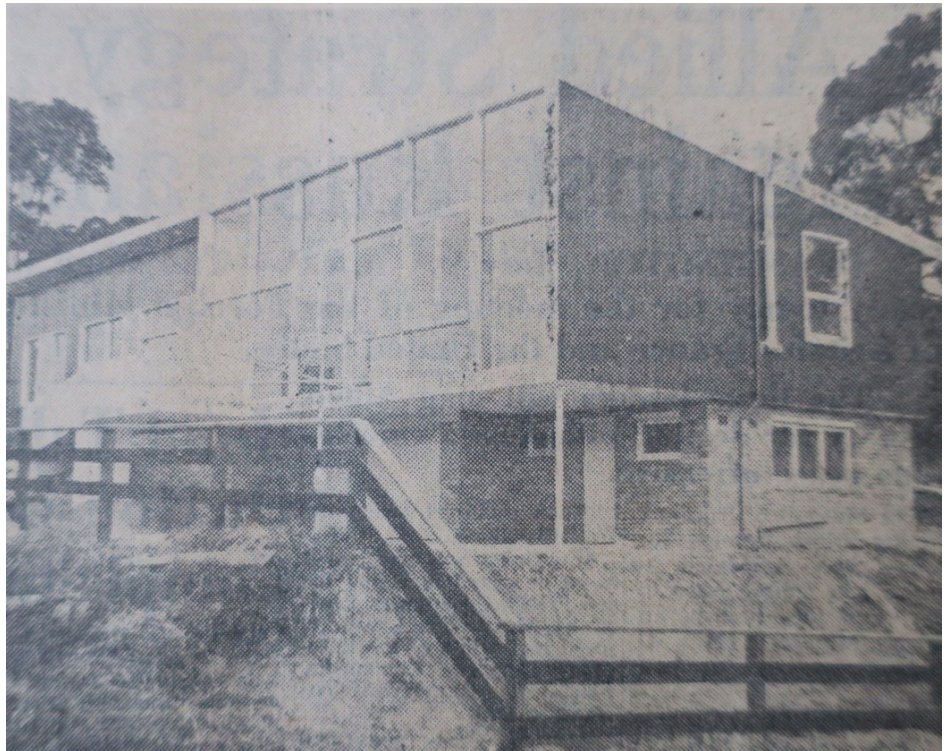


Figure 8: 'Orana' nearing completion in July 1953.
Source: *Newcastle Morning Herald*, 10 July 1953, 4.

34. Robin Boyd, "The Pacific Home: California & Victoria, Architectural Twins," *The Age*, 9 October 1948, 2.

35. See "America-To-day Architectural Exhibition," *Construction*, 8 December 1948, 5.

Reference to California as a place of interest indicates that Morton may have been following Robin Boyd's earlier argument about the parallels between the recent architecture of Victoria and that of California.³⁴ Boyd had claimed that "simple rugged form" united buildings in these two places, as did the use of flat roofs and an interest in open plans. In conjunction with this, it is highly likely Morton visited the 'America To-day' exhibition of US West Coast architecture when it was held in Sydney in December 1948. This exhibition displayed the work of Harwell Hamilton Harris, Gardner A. Dailey and Kump & Falk among others.³⁵ A comparison between 'Orana' and Dailey's Owens House (1939) in Sausalito certainly reveals similarities in materiality, elevation and design for sun exposure. Closer to home, 'Orana' bears obvious comparison to the houses of Harry Seidler which Morton would have known about. Both 'Orana' and the Rose Seidler House, for instance, were timbered volumes that partly sat on steel poles and were suspended over a lower ground level. Both had a side ramp entry and principal elevations made of an irregular pattern of window frames. Seidler's predilections however

were towards Bauhaus-inspired US East Coast modernism rather than California.

Conclusion

'Orana' represented a release of design freedoms that came with the lifting of building restrictions in New South Wales in the early 1950s. Its design and construction may have been inspired by an exposure to Californian regional modernism, but this paper shows that 'Orana' grew out of the formation of a modernist sensibility that is seen in Morton's student work. His time in the office of Castleden & Sara and as a student at Sydney Technical College were the seeding ground for ideas and principles that would inform his later built work, starting with 'Orana'. This is the necessary context to begin a following study of Morton's practice and his other house designs in the 1950s and beyond. As indicated in the introduction to this paper, what becomes a more dramatic element to these is the challenge he embraced in designing for steep sites and the structural and constructional bravado this entailed.