
Copyright © 2006 Inderscience Publishers.

This is the author’s version of the work. It is posted here with permission of the publisher for your personal use. No further distribution is permitted. If your Library has a subscription to this journal, you may also be able to access the published version via the library catalogue.
From “Britain's Farm” to “America's Junior Partner” and beyond: Post-WWII exhibitions of design in Melbourne.

Dr Simon Jackson

Abstract

“Britain’s Farm” and “America’s Junior Partner”. That’s what Australia was labelled around the WWII period. Prior to WWII it is argued Australia was largely an agrarian nation serving the interests of the British Empire, while the threats posed by WWII marked the nation's transformation in becoming industrialised and “Americanised”.

The key themes of this paper will be exploring the industrialisation of Australia, and the cultural pull for Australian industrial designers between their country’s old cultural and economic allegiances to Britain and the increasing post-WWII dominance of America. Late in the 1950s there were signs that Australia was also becoming increasingly open to other design cultures including Scandinavia, European countries and Japan.

Exhibitions of fine art have been widely acknowledged in histories of Australian cultural life. Much less attention, however, has been paid to Australia’s industrial fairs and exhibitions of manufactures despite their enormous contribution towards the industrialisation, modernisation and the changing national identity of Australia. Several industrial fairs will therefore be presented as case-studies through which these themes will be explored.

Keywords

Industrial Design – Australia; Australian National Identity; Royal Melbourne Exhibition Buildings; Expo; Exhibition; Trade Fair; Hills Hoist
Biographical note

Dr Simon Jackson studied for a B.A. in sculpture at The Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. He then and received his B.A (Hons.) and Master of Arts in art history from the University of Melbourne. He received his PhD from Monash University for his thesis investigating the history of industrial design in Australia. He lectures at the Faculty of Design, Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia.
Melbourne as Australia's industrial design and manufacturing centre

In the years following WWII, Melbourne was clearly the manufacturing and design hub of Australia. The development of aeroplanes and engines for the war effort had taken place here while the first all-Australian-made (if not wholly Australian-designed) motorcars rolled off Holden’s Melbourne production lines in 1948. Australia's first specialised industrial design course was offered at Melbourne Technical College (now RMIT University) from 1945. In addition to this, the Royal Melbourne Exhibition Buildings was the most important venue for trade and public exhibitions of manufactured goods in Melbourne, and arguably Australia. Car shows, boat shows, consumer goods fairs, and perhaps most importantly, ‘modern’ or ‘ideal home’ shows gave the public an opportunity to view a wider range of new ideas in industrial design from Australia and abroad than was on display in galleries or offered for sale by retailers. The Royal Melbourne Exhibition Buildings’ importance as a place of display was established with its 19th century world exhibitions of manufactures, and in that sense, it was an arena of industrial design promotion from its very inception.

In the late 19th century several exhibitions of Australian-made consumer goods were staged at the Royal Melbourne Exhibition Buildings beginning a tradition that was to last at this venue for over a century. Nationalistic themes were dominant at the exhibitions. Consumers in the colony were urged to ‘Buy Australian’ and it was boasted the goods were ‘Made in Australia.’ For example the Australian Natives’ Association put on several exhibitions. Their 1913 Industrial Exhibition was followed by the 1920 Australian Natives’ Association Exhibition of Australian Industry and the 1924 All Australian Exhibition. Exhibitions were staged less frequently during the

---

years around WWI and the depression years of the 1930s while fewer events again were staged in the years immediately before and during WWII.

After WWII, however, a series of exhibitions were held at the Royal Melbourne Exhibition Buildings intended to promote the economic and industrial ‘reconstruction’ of the country. A review of six separate exhibitions reveals several themes. ‘Promoting modernism’ and ‘post-war reconstruction’ (often stated as ‘your responsibility to Buy Australian Made’) may be regarded in retrospect as appropriate exhibition themes for a country just emerged from the privations of war. Other themes touched on notions of national identity. WWII is often cited as making a turning point for Australia as the formerly agrarian and British-influenced culture now looked to develop its industrial base and develop closer ties with the United States of America. It is therefore not surprising to find exhibitions that sought to demonstrate ‘the continuing link between Britain and Australia’ in the face of such creeping Americanisation. Beyond these powerful influences, other countries were also participating within Australia’s nascent design culture. The year 1959 saw the first international trade fair hosted in Australia since the last of the great 19th century exhibitions.

**Australian society - from British to American influence.**

While a small American influence was present in the 19th century British colony of Australia, the Fall of Singapore in 1942 has been cited by many historians as marking a new phase in Australia’s relations with America. Fractures in Australia’s relationship with Britain appeared during WWII when Australia declared war on Japan independently of Britain (as opposed to 1939 when Australia was at war with

---

2 For a fuller discussion about Australia’s attempts to “invent”, and ultimately fabricate, its own design identity separate from Britain and the USA see “The Stump-jumpers”: national identity and the mythology of Australian industrial design in the period 1930-1975” Design Issues Vol.XVIII No.4 Autumn 2002
Germany essentially because Britain was). Similarly, the return of the AIF from the Middle East in 1942 against Churchill’s wishes was another indication of a new Australian independence. Prime Minister Curtin anticipated the new relationship with America when he announced that:

The Australian Government regards the Pacific struggle as primarily one in which the United States and Australia must have the fullest say in the direction of the democracies’ fighting plan. Without any inhibitions of any kind, I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America free of any pangs as to Australia’s traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom. We know the problems that the United Kingdom faces, we know the constant threat of invasion, we know the dangers of dispersal of strength, but we know, too, that Australia can go and Britain can still hold on.

Even though Curtin later claimed these words had been taken out of context - that these words referred to the geographical needs of the allies and did not carry any separatist implications - German and Japanese propagandists seized upon these words with great delight. Despite Curtin’s qualification, the collaboration between Australia and America in the Pacific did indeed mark symbolically the weakening of one alliance and the strengthening of another. Many historians have claimed there was a lessening of British influence in Australian society after WWII. For instance, Hoorn and Firth have traced the demise of Empire Day celebrations in Australia. They noted that by the 1950s, the original, loyalist symbolism of the celebration had died and the celebration became known popularly as Cracker Night.

---

5 Firth and Hoorn. ‘From Empire Day.’ pp. 34-35.
Other indications of a break in relations between the two countries have been noted by other historians: Menzies’ loyalist attempt in 1963 to call Australia’s new decimal currency the ‘Royal’ was thwarted, the British Medical Association (in Australia) was re-named the Australian Medical Association and the Church of England added to its title the phrase ‘in Australia’. The decision to build a car in Australia (the first Holden in 1948 was American in styling and technology) also marked a symbolic change of focus from the British to the American era of cultural and economic domination in Australia.

1956 was an eventful year as both television and the Olympic Games came to Australia. This year marks for some historians the high point of a brief period in which Australia seemed to have a distinctive cultural voice. A huge Arts Festival featuring an exhibition of Australian industrial design objects was organised alongside the sporting events.

Television was a powerful agent for the transmission of cultural influence. In his reflections of the early days of television in *The Australian* newspaper in 1970, journalist Philip Adams wrote of Australia’s love of the American series *I Love Lucy* and *Father Knows Best* while a review of local newspapers of the late 1950s and 1960s reveals several other American series shown in Australia: *The Rebel, Wagon Train, Rawhide, Gunsmoke, Peter Gunn, Dragnet and Highway Patrol*. The transmission of cultural imperialism through Australian television has been observed by historian Richard White who claimed advertisements for American products were displayed to Australian consumers on the above programs. Australian nationalists were concerned these television series were agents of cultural imperialism and would

---

spread the values and habits of a foreign culture at the expense of the local culture. Within two years of television in Australia, 85% of programs shown were American.\(^8\)

While it is tempting to declare WWII as a ‘watershed’ for Australia’s transfer of allegiance from Britain to America, such a notion needs to be treated with caution as Americanisation was occurring in the 19th century. Similarly, the Australian transfer of allegiance did not occur overnight and a British influence was felt long afterwards. For example, Menzies’ funeral was attended by many British dignitaries. Likewise the RSL, the Royal Commonwealth Society, the squatocracy, the high number of members of Prime Minister Gorton’s cabinet educated at ‘Oxbridge’ and the Churchill Fellowship scheme all spoke of a continuing, although diminishing, attachment to Britain.\(^9\)

It can not be denied, however, that Australia was becoming more receptive to American culture and was thirsty for new ideas.

**The WWII ‘watershed’ theory.**

Many Australian historians (notably Humphrey McQueen\(^10\), John Williams\(^11\) and Tony Fry\(^12\)) have employed the WWII ‘watershed’ theory in their accounts of recent Australian history. The theory holds that WWII marked a turning point in many facets

---


of Australian cultural and economic life. It argues that WWII saw the transformation of Australia from being an agrarian outpost of the British Empire to a manufacturing-based consumer society and satellite of what many historians have called a new ‘imperial master’, America. The watershed theory seems appropriate given two factors occurring at this time: first, that specific industrial design education in Australia has its immediate roots in the late 1930s preparation for the war that many sensed was coming; second, that WWII was the impetus for a massive expansion of American involvement in Australia.

The industrialisation of Australia is thought to be another phenomenon explained by the watershed theory. This is another dominant theme in histories of Australia where it is often claimed ‘Australia was educated (in an industrial sense) by its experience in two world wars.’ Other historians, however, have argued the watershed theory tends to discount earlier American influence and industrialisation in Australia even at a basic political or diplomatic level. In these respects, much was happening prior to the bombing of Pearl Harbour and the Fall of Singapore. This was reflected in the intensity of the Australian debate over the Sino-Japanese war in which America took the Chinese side. Also, far earlier, Australia’s celebration of the 1908 arrival of the Great White Fleet - the American navy - assured Australia of a close relationship with America in the face of Japan’s recent naval expansion.

Similarly, Australia’s contact with American manufacturing occurred perhaps a century before the watershed theory suggests it did. Historian Donald Brash traced

---


3 Foy and Gibson’s catalogue of 1923 and recent facsimile editions of similar catalogues assembled by Peter Cuffley in his text *Chandeliers and Billy Tea: a Catalogue of Australian Life 1880 - 1940* (Hawthorn, Vic: The Five Mile Press, 1984) demonstrate the diversity and number of Australian manufactures. These were often manufactured under license or copied from abroad.

the involvement of American investment in Australian industry well before WWII - back as far as 1896.\(^\text{16}\) Similarly Richard White noted there were imports of Singer sewing machines, Otis elevators and American companies bringing new business methods from this time onwards. From the late 1890s to WWI, imports from America doubled from 6% to 12% despite the 1908 Empire Preference Scheme that largely obliged Australia to trade with Britain. WWI saw German and British imports to Australia drop while America’s trade proportion, far less affected by naval war, doubled again to 24% and remained at about this level until 1930.\(^\text{17}\) The watershed theory is wrong - there was clearly much Australian contact with Americans before WWII.

In addition to this, American business methods were employed in Australia prior to the war. These included, in particular, American industrial psychology, advertising psychology, time-and-motion studies and mass production methods. White further noted Australia in turn produced three industrial psychology theorists of some repute,\(^\text{18}\) engaging in this very American activity. American business methods were noted by a visitor to the Holden Body Works in Adelaide in 1922:

...the effect of American influence is noticeable throughout the works, and more particularly so in the labour-saving machines. Some of these were of most ingenious construction, and, though met for the first time by many, were quickly recognised by those familiar with the American trade press.\(^\text{19}\)

\(^\text{18}\) Ibid., p. 14.
This visit took place some 26 years before the celebrated ‘first’ Holden, the 48-215, rolled off the production lines - a moment celebrated in most histories of Australia as a moment of national maturity, industrialisation and (sometimes) as a moment of American domination. White has also noted a wide range of ‘American’ consumer objects available in Australia during the 1920s included radios, gramophones, electric irons, heaters, toasters. These were sometimes imported from America or were made in Australia either by American-affiliated companies in the American-style or by Australian companies ‘under license’ to the original American manufacturer. These products were then often bought by the Australian consumer using ‘American time-payment methods’, encouraged by American-style advertising.  

But while it is true American investment in Australia increased greatly after WWII, it was still outstripped by British investments. For example in 1948 British investments in Australia still exceeded those of America by a factor of four to one. On average, from the end of WWII to the mid-1950s, British investments in Australia were at least 50% higher than American investments. This situation changed in 1964 when investments in Australian companies from America finally equalled British investments. Does this suggest there should be a 1960 watershed theory? No, things are not so simple.

This paper suggests WWII was a ‘catalysing’ time when many ‘changes’ previously occurring in Australian society were accelerated at a time of national need. Historian Tony Fry has recently observed ‘Industrial design did not really exist in Australia before World War II.’ He is right only if he is referring to the ‘professionalisation’ of the activity through specific tertiary education and professional associations, both of

---

21Brash. American Investment. p. 8
22Fry. Design History. p. 45
which arose at this time. Some facts do seem to support Fry's claim. In terms of American involvement in Australian industry, 1948 is a significant year in which the first largely Australian-made (if not actually Australian-designed) mass-produced car appeared. The high local content in the Holden led to much industrial design activity in the Australian automobile industry. This paper argues the production and consumption of designed products in Australia was not initiated by WWII but was certainly expanded by it. The war gave Australian production lines new efficiency and a significant quantity of new equipment and technology. At the same time, wartime privations ensured every returning serviceman and woman was eager to participate in the emergent consumer society and buy (on American-style credit) a home full of consumer products, an American-designed car and start a family. And the various trade shows and fairs promoted this.

A review of six exhibitions and trade fairs held at the Royal Melbourne Exhibition Buildings in the immediate post-war era reveal the themes of Australia's movement from being a British-influenced agrarian society to becoming an America-influenced industrial one.

‘Modernity’ - The Herald Atomic Age and Industrial Exhibition at the Royal Melbourne Exhibition Buildings, 1948

The first of the post-war exhibitions held at the Royal Melbourne Exhibition Buildings embraced ‘modernity’ in its most extreme form. The Herald Atomic Age and Industrial Exhibition was staged during February 1948, less than three years after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The exhibition catalogue had an extraordinarily menacing image on its cover. [Fig. 1]
In the Foreword, the evident controversy of the exhibition was discussed:

In the Foreword, the evident controversy of the exhibition was discussed:

Early in August, 1945, the world heard for the first time a new phrase - the Atomic Age. It is a phrase around which, in the thirty months since then, the hopes and fears of mankind have increasingly centred...In the Atomic Age and Industrial Exhibition now presented in Melbourne, an attempt has been made - despite Hiroshima and Nagasaki - to place the emphasis, primarily, on the constructive aspect of atomic energy. Its application can be better directed to the promotion of life and happiness if there is more general understanding of the atomic story up to now.23

The organisers of the event, The Herald and Weekly Times (newspaper) management, may well have seen the exhibition as a challenge to the values of the local community, similar to its Exhibition of Modern Art held nine years earlier. There

---

seems to be an air of celebration in the exhibition’s catalogue essays and their ‘dramatic’ titles. Australian manufacturers exhibiting goods in the *Atomic Age and Industrial Exhibition* were many and varied; some utilised high technology as understood at the time; some did not. All were really at the exhibition to show a war-weary public the new consumer goods they had for sale. One advertisement in the exhibition catalogue that seemed in the spirit of the show promoted locally-made Repco engine parts as a vision of ‘the automotive world of tomorrow’. A futuristic streamlined ‘bubble’ car was presented in a scientific glass, while test tubes and industrial chimneys exhaling smoke continued the iconography of ‘progress’ and ‘the future.’

‘Promoting modernism’ The Modern Home Exhibition at the Royal Melbourne Exhibition Buildings, 1949

The *Modern Home Exhibition*, held at the Royal Melbourne Exhibition Buildings between 20 October and 1 November 1949, is selected as a case study because of its promotion of ‘modernism’ and consumer products. The exhibition featured a series of full-size model houses billed as the ‘Homes of Yesterday’, ‘Today’ and ‘Tomorrow’ and was well attended by a war-weary public eager to explore new ideas. [Fig. 2]

---

Organised on behalf of the Red Cross Society, with important local architects Robin Boyd and Peter McIntyre playing leading roles, the exhibition was intended to encourage an awareness of ‘good design’, which in the late 1940s in Australian intellectual circles meant an approximation of European buildings and consumer products. In this young country, many designers and commentators were eager that Australia throw off the shackles of its colonial history and appear to be a vigorous and modern nation. In describing the exhibition’s genesis in the journal *Architecture* a few months later, Boyd criticised Australia’s past architecture and manufactured consumer goods and what he perceived to be the poor state of consumer products at the time:

The theme was ‘Yesterday, Today, To-morrow.’ The idea was to take the 1890’s as ‘Yesterday,’ and to poke fun at its floral toilet fittings and unlikely-looking black iron equipment. ‘Today’ was to show, impartially, a representative collection of currently available products. ‘To-morrow’ would be applied to outstanding designs in the various fields. A small jury, led by Prof. Brian Lewis, selected ‘To-morrow’s’ items. But the pity of it was there was so little of value from which the jury could select.25

The Foreword of the official catalogue of the *Modern Home Exhibition* was more tactful but was still critical. Edna Horton Lewis held that the privations of WWII were responsible for the lack of quality in consumer objects and the consequent diminution of the national sense of taste.26 It is possible Lewis, a woman, was making a direct appeal to the housewife, the chief purchaser of goods in the home when she claimed:

---


Shortages forced many of us to buy things we knew to be second-rate simply because there was no alternative. But in many instances, we became too accustomed to accepting what was put before us unquestioningly.27

Lewis’ words echo the ideals of European modernism. Rather than selecting consumer products because they looked ‘eye catching or novel’ or because they looked ‘rich’, or because ‘everybody has them’, she encouraged visitors to the exhibition to focus instead on the function of the product:

To choose things intelligently means asking oneself questions about the design, material, construction and finish of any object and its competitors. Is the design practical? Does it help one to use the particular object easily?28

Was Lewis speaking to women principally in this Foreword? While it cannot be stated for certain, it does seem to be the case. The essay ‘Planning Your New Kitchen’, a few pages later on, directly addressed the housewife and what she should have in her kitchen: heights of bench-tops, the location of the sink near a window, the kitchen’s proximity to her dining room and so on. Blaming the housewife for making the ‘wrong’ consumer choices became a game played by many, mostly male, Australian design critics.

American influence at the Modern Home Exhibition.
The growing influence of America on Australia’s design community is also apparent in this important post-war exhibition. A ‘Special America Exhibit’ was organised by the American Consulate Cultural Department consisting of 1,200 photographs, plans

---

27Ibid.
28Ibid.
and diagrams, 100 books and 500 special reports all of which reflected American practice in the design fields of architecture, building and planning, interior design and industrial design. Financial advice was also offered: ‘Information is provided on such subjects as housing needs, costs and financing methods.’ These financing methods included ‘hire-purchase’ and had been largely unavailable, or unappealing, to Australian consumers before WWII. Historians have traced the swing in Australian consumer attitudes from what they characterised as pre-WWII ‘British frugality’ to post-WWII ‘American consumption’ - a transition they claimed took less than a decade and which was aided by the arrival in Australia of American-style easy-credit.

Australian participants.

No less than seventy Australian companies had trade stands devoted to their products at the Modern Home Exhibition. Prominent magazines Woman’s Day and The Australian Home Beautiful had their own displays, stands were devoted to home furnishing retailers Cohen Brothers and Georges Ltd and a dozen others. There were stands occupied by builders’ suppliers: Regent Traders (nails and wire), Romcke (plywood and veneers), Australian Plaster Industries and various hot water appliances. Consumer goods were many and varied.

A major trade stand, positioned in the Central Exhibit, was occupied by the Australian company Moulded Products (Australasia). There, consumer products such as ‘Nylex’ shower curtains, light pendants, lamp shades and garden hoses, ‘Duperite’ toilet seats, utility and picnic wares, plastic bread covers, plastic clothes lines and many other items for the home were displayed. Plastics were clearly an arena allowing

great experimentation. Objects such as baths, wash basins and sinks, previously made from porcelain or cast iron were offered by the Appleton company in Perspex, the new wonder material.31

Many small engineering firms, most of them no longer trading, manufactured appliances for the kitchen. While it is unclear how much actual design work was carried out in Australia, and how much was merely copied from overseas models, the range and variety of Australian-made goods cannot be denied: refrigerators, clothes washers and electric heaters manufactured by Brooks, Henry & Co., kerosene and gas powered refrigerators from Cash Engineering Co. and C. I. H., vacuum cleaners, electric lawn mowers, electric floor polishers and cake mixers and electric stoves from Electrix, chairs from Hallmark Products, sewing machines and radiators from Harrison & Smith, 'Vaporwear Cookware' from Homewears, refrigerators and washing machines, electric jugs, irons, toasters and radiators from Nilsen Industries, a lawn mower from Ogden Industries, various radios from Radio Corporation, coffee percolators, stoves, ‘wash copper’ and electric waffle irons from Servex Electrical Co., toasters and stovettes from Vulcan Electric.32

It would appear, however, that being Australian-made was not enough to woo the consumer. For most Australian consumers at this time, the word ‘American’ was synonymous with modernity and style. Locally-made products were often advertised as ‘American-style’ or ‘popular in America’ in order to give them added consumer appeal. For example, one furniture advertisement in the Modern Home Exhibition catalogue claimed ‘Chevron Furnishers, of 163 Swan Street, Richmond, are displaying the very latest in Tubular Furniture, which has proved so popular in America...’ And this despite the fact that such cantilever chrome furniture was clearly

32Ibid.
copied from Mart Stam and Marcel Breuer! A Westinghouse Stove was advertised both as ‘The best for your Modern home’ and ‘Modelled on American lines’.33 In advertising such as this, the terms ‘modern’ and ‘American’ were almost synonymous.

Conversely, conservative local retailers and manufacturers looked back to Britain, and to a lesser extent, France, when they wished to invest an Australian-made object with ‘heritage’. The Cohen Brothers’ stand featured reproduction antiques advertising ‘Dining Room Suites in Chippendale design’, while many retailers featured English Wilton carpets in traditional designs. The local retailers, Tanner & Mathews, offered two-seater couches covered with Regency Stripe fabric and Windsor dining settings. Standis Furniture, Melbourne was a manufacturer specialising in English and French antique reproductions: Queen Anne and Chippendale bedroom and dining suites, Charles II dining suites and Louis XV bedroom suites.34

The House of Tomorrow.

The chief attraction of the Modern Home Exhibition was the separate House of Tomorrow - a challenging design proposal. To put the display house into an historical context, it should be noted that there were very few other such modern houses in Australia at the time. In fact, the House of Tomorrow was directly contemporary with the most famous modern domestic residence in mid-century Australia. The Rose Seidler House designed by Viennese-born architect Harry Seidler was erected in 1948-1950. Seidler had studied in America with Walter Gropius, Joseph Albers and Marcel Breuer. The influence of these modernists is evident in his design’s open plan layout and minimal colour schemes. The house was awarded Australia’s prestigious architectural award the Sulman Medal in 1952. Nor

33Ibid.
34Ibid.
were there any skyscrapers at this time in Australian cities. The first prominent one was ICI House, designed by architects Bates, Smart and McCutcheon. Erected in Melbourne in 1958 it was then Australia’s tallest building. Internationalist in style ICI House was the first sheer glazed curtain wall, precast reinforced concrete skyscraper.

The House of Tomorrow proposal within the Modern Home Exhibition was designed and constructed by Robin Boyd, Peter McIntyre and the Architecture students of the University of Melbourne. Measuring ‘about 1,300 square feet’, the small two-storey display house contained a sitting room, master bedroom, child’s bedroom, kitchen-dining room and bathroom. When writing about the design, Boyd argued that while houses built in the 19th century were suited to one way of living, they were not necessarily suited to the needs of Australians in 1949. The House of Tomorrow, therefore, was to embody new post-war living patterns, a theme encapsulated in Boyd’s phrase ‘planning for function’. Sunlight within the House was to be maximised, colour harmony and the tactile qualities of timbers and brick were intended to create an appropriate modern atmosphere. Boyd suggested the architect’s central role in the creation of a family home:

In the houses of tomorrow good appearance will not be bought cheaply with the addition of a few decorative afterthoughts. Simple, efficient, balanced design will start with the frame and will shape every finish and detail. A home building will not be a collection of unrelated ideas. All the conflicting problems will be unified in one simple vigorous conception.35

Boyd’s crusade against reproduction period styles and unnecessary decoration were recognised by an article in the *Herald* newspaper which claimed the display ‘put bad taste under fire.’\(^{36}\) Again, there was an equation of modernism with good taste.

Local industrial designer Grant Featherston styled an AWA television set prototype and some of the furniture for the *House of Tomorrow*. Described in the official catalogue as ‘2 Relaxation Chairs of modern design’, they were designed specifically for the house and ‘drew almost universal approval.’\(^{37}\) The Fler Company of Richmond, Melbourne, designed Scandinavian-inspired furniture for the dining room and bedroom. These examples of Australian furniture were undoubtedly chosen because of the simplicity of their styling. Fler’s advertisement in the exhibition catalogue stressed its source of influence: ‘Modern Swedish Furniture, Wooden Platters, Salad Bowls, etc.’ It is also telling that both companies’ advertisements in the exhibition catalogue were modern in their simplicity and graphic style. The catalogue from the *Modern Home Exhibition* included an essay on ‘Tomorrow’s Furniture’.\(^{38}\) The essay stressed the following criteria for ‘Tomorrow’s Furniture’.

Furniture should be ‘honest’ - the modernist maxim of ‘truth to material’ was evoked by the following lines:

> It is sometimes thought attractive to make teapots look like cottages, and ash timber resemble mahogany. Good design never fakes, and for this reason appearance depends very much on materials used. New forms derived from new materials are part of the exhilarating future - Sensitive flowing lines from moulded plywood, bent steel or aluminium, light and graceful cast alloys, sponge rubber and upholstery and washable plastic covers...Honesty in the

\(^{37}\) Ibid.
\(^{38}\) ‘Tomorrow’s Furniture’ in *Modern Home Exhibition*. pp. 3-5.
use of machines (no more antique reproductions) will produce cleaner, simpler furniture. The essay suggested furniture should be rational - no longer could design directions be dictated by 'snobbishness or mob-psychology'. Furniture should be 'flexible' to suit the new flexible floor plans of the modern home and should be 'easily-produced'. In all of these respects, Featherston and Fler complied. The Featherston chairs were described as 'loose' - unlike the traditional heavy two-seater or three-seater lounge suites, these Featherston chairs could be moved from room to room within the proposed new open-plan architectural spaces. Nonetheless, these graceful and “Scandinavian-inspired” Australian designs were out-numbered by the ‘antique reproductions’ which were exhibited in the main exhibition hall.

Public reception of the House of Tomorrow.
The following public responses were noted and reprinted in the January 1950 issue of Architecture. According to one visitor ‘It gives me a feeling of relaxation...the impression of stability, endurance and plain, honest, worth-while quality.’ Another decided the House was ‘More of a dream house from the screen...The average working man would be afraid to invest...without knowledge of its proof against weather, wear and time’, while another claimed it was ‘light, spacious, attractive, and comfortable’.

The Modern Home Exhibition displayed a broad range of Australian manufactures available on the post-war market. Within the Exhibition, the House of Tomorrow

---

39Ibid.
40Ibid.
suggested a modern alternative to suit changed post-war living patterns. Within the
*House* itself, a few consumer objects apparently met with critical and public approval.

Some things were clear, however. The dramatic newspaper reports (using the
emotive wartime terms: ‘battles’, ‘bad taste under fire’) suggested an excitement
about modern architecture and industrial design and a willingness on the part of the
public to attend such exhibitions if only to make adverse comments. Secondly, the
role of architecture as informant for industrial design practice in Australia was clear.

For some, however, idealistic crusading about ‘good design’ was a luxury. Industrial
reconstruction of the nation was perceived to be the major goal.

*Post-WWII reconstruction’ - the Australian Industrial Fair at the Royal
Melbourne Exhibition Buildings, 1949

The 1949 *Australian Industrial Fair* aggressively promoted buying Australian and
stressed ‘The Importance of Secondary Industries to Australia.’ Inspired by the 1939
*New York World’s Fair*, the rather dated term ‘Exhibition’ was supplanted by the
rather more commercial sounding American term - *Fair*. In his Foreword to the
*Souvenir Guide Book*, Melbourne’s Lord Mayor, James Disney, proclaimed
Australia’s readiness to become an industrial nation:

> Australia had thus, by 1945, built up a sound industrial nucleus as a result of
> the war. Secondary industries are now anxious to expand further; to

---

43 Consistent with Australia’s deference to international design powers, the names of these Australian
events often took their lead from international events. Britain’s 1851 *Great Exhibition* led Australia
and other countries to use the term ‘Exhibition’. After the 1939 *New York World’s Fair*, however, the
term ‘Fair’ became more prevalent. Similarly the 1951 *Festival of Britain* would lead some Australian
events to be termed ‘Festivals’ and the success of Montreal’s *Expo ’67* to the use of ‘Expo’. As
various post-colonial critics have suggested, the ‘centre’ culture does indeed assume responsibility for
language. See Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back, Theory and
undertake the manufacture of products never before made in Australia; to test
the possibilities of marketing secondary industry products overseas.44

Symbolising this imperative, the cover of the catalogue featured an image of a large
gear cog. [Fig. 3]

This *Fair* can also be seen as another movement towards the development of the
post-WWII consumer society. Of the 54 companies or retailers displaying goods or
services, many offered new consumer goods. In order to facilitate this, the
Department of Supply and Development, display Stand no. 1 at the *Fair*, offered
manufacturers advice on two areas. While still claiming to be ‘in control of all the
factories and undertakings responsible for the defence of the Commonwealth’, the
Department also claimed their ‘factories are assisting private enterprise by using their
highly-skilled technicians and intricate precision machinery for the assistance of
private industry.’45 The Department of Commerce and Agriculture was also offering
to assist local manufacturers by drawing upon the resources of the Australian Trade
Commissioner Service and so helping with the export of Australian-made goods.46

---

44 Disney, James ‘The Importance of Secondary Industries to Australia.’ In *The Australian Industrial
45 [Stand No. 1. Department of Supply & Development] in ibid., p. 35.
46 The network of trade Commissioner posts, situated in key marketing centres of the world, is shown
by an illuminated map. The services provided by the Trade Commissioners are detailed - special points
being market research, investigation of importers’ credit standing, shipping and transport advice, and
This support was intended to help Australian factories ‘develop their full capacity for production and employment’ and to make Australia generally less vulnerable to the price fluctuations of its traditional primary exports. This was probably also a reaction to the 1930s depression where Australia was suffered from falling agriculture and mining prices. In 1946-7 the first post-war statistical collection was undertaken by the Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics. It found rural and mining sectors employed 448,928 people while 745,258 were employed in factories. These figures still reflect a significant reliance on ‘primary’ activities. If the manufacturing sector seems to be very strong at this time, it is also important to realise that many industries termed as ‘manufacturing’ still involved fairly basic processing of raw commodities. Many businesses cited in the Census as ‘industry’ did not actually need the skills of industrial designers. Examples included the making of foods, tanning of skins, processing of oils and fats. Nonetheless, it was apparent that WWII and the new consumer society had indeed given Australian manufacturing added impetus, and that despite a certain tendency to identify with the bush, many more Australians worked in urban factories than on the land.

Evidence of increasing industrial capacity is revealed in the fact that 1949 also saw the first post-war International Motor Show, at which the first all-Australian made Holden car was exhibited, the first Australian Fashion Fair, the first Modern Home Exhibition, with its displays of manufactured consumer goods, and the first Australian Aviation Fair.

\footnote{the promotion of Australian trade by uses of display, exhibitions, press and radio publicity, etc.’ [Stand No. 13. Department of Commerce Displays at Australian Industry Fair] In ibid., p. 37.}
\footnote{Official Year Book of the Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics 1946-7, p.848.}

As with the preceding exhibition, the 20th Century Mechanical Exhibition featured an image of a large gear cog on its cover. [Fig. 4]

Again at the Royal Melbourne Exhibition Buildings (between 12-21 October 1950), this show reflected the continuing link between Britain and Australia in simultaneously promoting the ‘Made in Australia’ label while also promoting British goods. While internationally the popular catch cry ‘American know how’ expressed the confidence of American manufacturing power in the new post-war world, restrictions on American currency in Australia were imposed from the outset of WWII and were not lifted until 1963. British designed consumer goods thus enjoyed a increased number of sales on the Australian consumer market. Michael Bogle claims the mid-1960s marked the end of autonomous Australian industrial design activity with the arrival en masse of American and multi-national companies - Crown Corning, Ford Motor Company, the Dutch company Philips and others.48 The exhibition was introduced in the souvenir programme as a ‘most magnificent display

48 See Bogle, Michael. Design in Australia. p.143. While Bogle is generally correct, some American investment in Australia had occurred much earlier. Ford had been manufacturing in Australian since the mid-1920s as had several other American manufacturers. See Brash, Donald. American Investment in Australian Industry. Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1966. p. 291.
of the goods manufactured by Australian and British workmen.  

Ernest Blake, Vice-Chairman of the event, stressed the importance and quality of ‘Australian Made’ in the face of self-serving claims by importers:

Less than 30 years ago the label ‘MADE IN AUSTRALIA’ made customers look askance; to-day the stigma is wiped out and Australian secondary products are recognised as equal to the world’s best. Australian manufacturers have a hard row to hoe. Thirty years ago, importers, realising that soon they would not be wanted, disparaged Australian products to the utmost, unscrupulous retailers labelled superior Australian made goods as ‘Imported’, while anything that was actually of low grade was displayed as Australian. These guiles were so rampant that most Australian manufacturers dropped the ‘MADE IN AUSTRALIA’ label and put their own name in indelible type on every label they produced...

Assured that Australian-made was as good as the best the world could offer, Blake felt the time had come to proclaim this message to the local and international markets through advertising and participating in trade displays:

Hundreds of small factories are still in obscurity through lack of publicity. It certainly pays to advertise...Here [in this exhibition] is the opportunity to establish a name. Nothing impresses the public mind more than a visual display, and there is no more effective or cheaper way...

---

50 Blake, Ernest. In ibid., p. 11.
51 Ibid.
Prior to WWII many imported consumer goods did have a special allure. To some extent, the nationalism generated by WWII made it easier to market the idea of ‘Australian-made’ quality. A consistent and very successful example of this was ‘Australia’s Own’ Holden motorcar, which although largely American-designed, had most of its components manufactured in Australia and dominated the local market in a very short time. It was Australia’s first locally made, mass-produced car.

British goods at the 20th Century Mechanical Exhibition tended to be advertised with appeals to tradition, craftsmanship and Empire. For example, Woodray vacuum cleaners boasted they were ‘British built in the best tradition’, while even electric floor polishers simply stated they were ‘British built’ as if that guaranteed their quality. Ransomes’ lawn mowers were advertised as ‘World renowned British made’ while British-built Interphones were built ‘in England by the Empire’s largest manufacturers of telephone equipment...’

There is no doubt that while Ernest Blake felt the stigma of ‘Made in Australia’ was subsiding, the assurance of the ‘British-built’ product could not be denied. He was also right when he said Australian manufacturers needed to promote themselves through advertising more effectively. Generally speaking, those Australian firms on display seldom made claims for the performance or quality of their goods. A rare exception was Toyne’s rotary clothes hoist, which confidently advertised itself as ‘The World’s Best’.

Reflecting a culture concerned equally with industrial reconstruction and the immediate consumerist desires of the population, the 20th Century Mechanical Exhibition...
Exhibition had a fairly equal balance in its 65 stands between promoting manufacturing equipment and promoting domestic product design. 34 stands displayed machinery intended for industrial use (woodworking machinery, electronic and welding equipment, printing machinery, industrial diamonds, slicing machines, industrial sewing machines, mobile cranes, prefabricated factories, office equipment, spray painting equipment). Another 34 stands displayed consumer products intended for the home: radios and electrical equipment, domestic sewing machines, household refrigeration, food bottling equipment, various plastic products, brake linings for cars, watches, household heating products and a ‘clothes line display’ where Toyne’s rotary clothes lines and the various lines of R.T. Products were widely advertised. There was no mention of the much-lauded Hills Hoist.

Only 5 stands\textsuperscript{54} were devoted to machinery that related specifically to agricultural needs. Four of these stands featured tractors, while one featured fencing wire. Perhaps this poor representation has something to do with the fact this show was intended for an urban audience - many agricultural shows in country towns retained an emphasis on tractor, plough and stock displays. It is also possible that this 1950 exhibition reflected the general Australian post-WWII movement away from agricultural exports to a consumer-based society and increased economic activity generated by manufactured goods.

The following year, two exhibitions with vaguely monarchical titles - Commemoration Motor Show - a Celebration of Fifty Years of Cars and the Jubilee Homes Exhibition - further demonstrated that links with Britain persisted beyond the Fall of Singapore and the new post-war allegiance with America.

\textsuperscript{54}While I claimed there were 65 stands at the 20th Century Mechanical Exhibition, and have now mentioned 73, this is explained by the fact there was a degree of overlap at the Fair with some stands displaying more than one category of goods, i.e. ‘consumer’ and ‘industrial’ products together on a stand.

The next major exhibition held at the Royal Melbourne Exhibition Buildings (to be considered in this paper) actively promoted the local manufacturing culture, and by implication, the local industrial design culture. The Made in Australia Exhibition was organised by The Made in Australia Council, formed from representatives from the Australian Natives Association, Victorian Chamber of Manufacturers, the Australian Industries Protection League and the Advertising Association of Australia and New Zealand. On the cover of this exhibition’s catalogue, the gears which had featured as motifs on previous exhibitions’ catalogues were now depicted as symbolically ‘driving’ the country. [Fig. 5]

Following on from the 1949 Australian Industrial Fair and the 1950 20th Century Mechanical Exhibition, this 1952 show was the most determined to date in urging consumers to buy products which had been ‘Made in Australia’. Indeed, in one of the introductory essays to the Official Souvenir and Guide to the exhibition it was claimed to be ‘Your Responsibility’. In stern tones, J. C. Harkness, President of the Victorian Chamber of Manufactures, threatened unemployment, future wars and general economic malaise if the public did not buy Australian-made. The reasons why Australians were often buying imported goods was never explored. It might have been the case that, despite the rhetoric, Australian-made was inferior! This is an
early example of Australian manufacturers blaming the consumer, rather than looking to critically evaluate their own designs:

It is unfortunately true that a large number of the Australian buying public does not realise the full implications expressed in the label ‘Australian-Made.’ We know that our livelihood and the national economy depend upon the quantity and quality of, and the demand for, the products of this great country of ours.\footnote{Harkness, J.C. ‘‘Australian Made’ - Your Responsibility.’ Made in Australia Exhibition: Official Souvenir and Guide, Melbourne: The Made in Australia Council, 1952. p. 8.}

Raising the spectre of the depression again, Harkness went on to stress the danger of relying on primary exports, with their fluctuating values, and on the current post-WWII consumer demand for imported goods:

...goods which fritter away the overseas fund that could better be spent on capital equipment and materials needed for Australian development, and which take the place in our shops of articles which can, and should, be made equally well by Australian craftsmen... ‘Wherever you trade, Buy Australian Made’ should head every shopping list in Australia - then the bugbear of the fear of unemployment would be banished from our midst.\footnote{Ibid.}

\textit{‘The world comes to Melbourne’ - Melbourne 1959 International Trade Fair at the Royal Melbourne Exhibition Buildings.}

After looking to Britain, and then to America, for leadership in design and manufacturing (and indeed most other aspects of cultural life), there was a growing
receptiveness to other design cultures. One of the great displays of international design objects was held at the Royal Melbourne Exhibition Buildings between February 26 and March 14, 1959. Seventeen foreign countries brought their manufactured goods, raw materials and cultures generally before the Melbourne public. Participating countries were Australia, Austria, Ceylon, China, Denmark, France, Hong Kong, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, Norway, Pakistan, Poland, United Kingdom, Sweden, Switzerland, America and West Germany. Each country displayed a wide variety of goods from a variety of companies. A brief essay in the 194-page official catalogue describes each country’s economy and industrial base.

[Fig. 6] In the absence of official world exhibitions (none were hosted in Australia between the late 19th century and the 1988 Brisbane World Expo) the Melbourne 1959 International Trade Fair, and the subsequent International Fairs in Melbourne and Sydney may be regarded in retrospect as ambitious undertakings at a time when Australia was strangely reluctant to present itself as an independent country at world exhibitions abroad.57

The Australian Section at the 1959 International Trade Fair reflected the move away from reliance on traditional agricultural activities towards a greater emphasis on manufacturing. The Anglo-Australian Engineering Co. featured rotary lawnmowers, Avion Products displayed all types of motorised and folding wheel chairs, while various retailers and manufacturers displayed furniture, chandeliers and lighting. Refrigeration was displayed by Frigrite Limited. GM-H had a display, but chose to show American-designed Frigidaire kitchen appliances rather than any of its cars. The local Healing company, which participated in many such exhibitions, revealed the diversity of its business: refrigerators, heaters, air-conditioners and outboard motors. The English company Lucas revealed the variety of its Australian-made

---

57Australia’s 19th century confidence in hosting world exhibitions had given way to a timidity when exhibiting abroad in the 20th century.
products (electrical equipment for cars and motorbikes, aircraft, switchgear, lighting and batteries) but few of these would actually have been designed in Australia. Local plastics companies Pope and Plastic Specialties showed many consumer goods which relied on the material: shoe heels, plastic trays, plastic thermometers, refrigerators, washing machines, television receivers, lawn mowers, lawn sprinklers, irrigation equipment and electric motors.58

The chief concern of this paper has been exploring the cultural pull for Australian industrial designers between their country’s old allegiance to Britain and the increasing post-WWII dominance of America. The fact that as late as the 1959 International Trade Fair Britain was still Australia’s strongest trading partner, with America second, reflects the British allegiance was hard to shake. This paper has also charted the influence of industrial design products from other European countries on the local culture. At this particular show Germany had 56 manufacturing companies showing goods to Australian consumers, Italy had 11 while France had only one. The particularly strong influence of Scandinavian industrial design is also reflected at this particular Fair with a very strong Danish exhibit numbering 29 companies displaying stands of industrial design products. Sweden had four companies attending and Norway, two.

Japan was, however, the new major player within the Australian industrial design culture and was subsequently to dominate both Australian and international markets in many design areas. A total of 62 Japanese companies displayed a wide array of consumer products and other manufactured goods. And this at their first ever representation at an Australian Trade Fair!

58A list such as this reveals how difficult it would be to name the designers involved, even if one were inclined to write a history of design through the perspective of the ‘great man’. The designer is only acknowledged if the marketing of the product calls for it. For some reason, chairs often bear their designer’s name, but an equally useful piece of furniture, for example the bed or bath, or table, or refrigerator, which is just as complex to design, is not sourced to one designer.
Other exhibitions at the Royal Melbourne Exhibition Buildings.

While only six exhibitions have been reviewed in this paper, the following list is an attempt to demonstrate the diversity of Australian design and manufacturing after WWII. These trade fairs began their annual shows in this period: Chemtex (chemical technology exhibition) from 1947-, the first post-war International Motor Show 1949-, Australian Fashion Fair 1949-, Australian Aviation Fair 1949-, Better Home Shows 1952-, Office Management and Packaging Exhibition 1952-, Made in Australia Exhibition 1952-, the Ideal Home Show 1954-, Engineering and Industrial Exhibition 1954-, Electrical Industries Fair 1954-, National Automotive Products Exhibition 1955-, Big Boat Show 1960-, Electrorama 1960, Graphic Arts and Printing Exhibition 1962-, Caravan and Trailer Exhibition 1962-, and the Factory Equipment Exhibition 1966-, International Instruments, Electronics and Automation Exhibition 1969 and the Expo Electric'69.\textsuperscript{59}

Conclusions.

Australia's transition from being a largely British-influenced and agrarian culture to becoming an industrialised and Americanised one was made somewhere around WWII. Prior to WWII, the local manufacturing industry was modest and there was no specific training of industrial designers at tertiary level. However in the peace that followed the war, Australian design and manufacturing had reached such a level of sophistication that the first all-Australian manufactured car was released for sale.

At the 'idealistic' 1949 Modern Home Exhibition, important local architect and design critic Robin Boyd clearly conducted a crusade against 'reproduction' styles in consumer goods such as furniture, crockery and lighting in favour of that elusive goal

\textsuperscript{59}[Trade fairs and motor shows]: Royal Exhibition Buildings Archive, Melbourne. REB no. 2226.
- ‘modernism.’ By contrast, the four industrial exhibitions discussed had an emphasis on local production, on buying Australian (and to some extent on buying British as well) and so building up the nation’s industrial and economic power. These aims are well symbolised by the repeated use of gear cogs as images on their respective covers. No attempt here was made to improve public taste or further the cause of ‘good design’.

The final exhibition discussed, the *Melbourne 1959 International Trade Fair*, marked an important milestone in the country’s national maturity. Playing host to the world’s manufacturing nations it was a confident assertion of the strength of Melbourne’s, and indeed Australia’s, design and manufacturing capacities.

The frequency of German, Italian, Scandinavian and Japanese design products appearing in these Industrial Fairs was mapped against those from Britain and America. Japan, in particular, displaced these nations’ influence to become Australia’s new major economic and design trading partner from the 1970s onwards, and a new source of cheap, well designed and well manufactured consumer products in people’s homes. The findings of this research therefore suggest some cultural influences have been largely “written out” of our very Anglo-Celtic accounts of our national history. Several published histories of design education and practice in Australia will have to be up-dated as a result of these findings to better acknowledge contributions from countries other than Britain and America.

The six Industrial Fairs presented in this paper have allowed the narrative of Australia’s growing maturity as an independent and industrialised nation to be told.