

— LIFE CYCLE — PRESHIL

review
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Over the coming issues, *AR* will present *Life Cycle*, a series of articles documenting mid-century Australian architecture of note. Teaming up with Docomomo, an organisation dedicated to the preservation of our modernist architectural heritage, the series will examine how these buildings have evolved over time, and their continuing relevance to both the discipline of architecture and the communities that they serve. For our first feature in the series, we visit Kevin Borland's Preshil School in Melbourne. Built between 1962 and 1972, far from being frozen in time, Preshil has grown and matured along with the many thousands of children that have passed through its walls. Nearly five decades after construction began, its principles still set a benchmark in innovative educational design.



The 'tree house', constructed in 1965 – two elevated classrooms separated by a timber deck and an Italian Cypress.

On a Sunday afternoon in March this year, a group of architects, students and researchers went on a tour of the Preshil School campus in Kew, Melbourne. The tour was organised by Docomomo Australia. To promote awareness, and more importantly a genuine fondness for Australian modernism, for the past three years the Victorian-based Docomomo group has organised tours of modern buildings. We have visited a number of private houses in Melbourne and recently decided that it was high-time some non-domestic sites should be included, hence the tour of the Preshil Primary School campus.

Why this school? Because Preshil is a unique and loved learning environment – architecturally innovative yet suburban, playful and modest – and it remains largely as it was built in the early- to mid-1960s when Kevin Borland's practice was commissioned to design the school hall and other classrooms. In 1972, Borland was awarded the RAlA Victorian chapter Bronze medal for the school campus, which encompassed six buildings designed between 1962 and 1972, including the octagonal school hall and various classrooms such as the elevated 'Long Room' building with a tree growing through the timber deck, and the multi-level and cellular-planned 'Home Rooms' (John Kenny assistant architect, 1972).

Borland remained closely associated with Preshil as architect and parent for many years, and the school has had many other architect-guardians from among its former students or involved parents. It is this local and professional sense of attachment to this school that made me somewhat wary of writing anything about it, as there are many others who could, and have, written more authoritatively on both the buildings and their pedagogy.^[01] So a disclaimer perhaps is needed that what follows here is based on what was seen and heard on the day of the Docomomo tour, and hence the impressions of an 'outsider'.

Preshil is a small non-government primary school of around 140 students. It was founded on progressive educational principles with links to the ideas of AS Neill, the Montessori and Reggio Emilia systems, which steer a path towards life-long learning that is essentially child-focused. The assumption is that children are reasonable people who should be fully involved in the decision-making of the school community and environment. This school philosophy has been described as a 'guided democracy' that is fundamentally non-competitive – which seems, incidentally, increasingly at odds with the current aggressive drive towards transparent national testing and ranking.

How have these educational ideals been born out in architectural innovation? There has been a notable history of the association of exploratory modern architects and innovative school design in Victoria. For example the Koornong School, designed by Best Overend for the experimental educators Clive and Janet Nield in 1939, was short-lived but influential. By the post-WWII era, there was widespread impetus for new architectural and environmental solutions to suit the great social, political and demographic shifts taking effect in Australia and Britain. School design explicitly moved towards the creation of a more 'civilised, humane and progressive atmosphere'.^[02] Yet although modern architecture played a large role in shaping new schools, the level of innovation, particularly in government primary schools, was self-limiting because of a pervading view that schools should be well designed and clean, yet not intimidating, monumental or distracting for children. More radical and imaginative ideas could be pursued somewhat more easily in the private than public sphere – with some notable exceptions.

Preshil today still feels refreshingly outside of the mainstream design assumptions that have generated appropriate and modern yet often dull schools in Australia. It is evident that the young

DOCOMOMO

Docomomo stands for the documentation and conservation of buildings, sites and neighbourhoods of the modern movement. This international organisation was founded in the Netherlands in 1990, inspired by the recognition that urgent attention was needed to document, conserve and promote awareness and appreciation of the architecture of the modern era. Docomomo now has more than 40 member countries, and this international breadth is one of its great strengths and sources of fruitful exchange. Docomomo Australia has active working groups in Sydney and Melbourne, and members throughout Australia. Docomomo Australia has been involved in the ongoing compilation of an international register of significant modernist works, and has spoken out against the destruction or disfigurement of notable modern Australian sites. For example, formal submissions have been made this year on the proposed demolition of Union Hall on the University of Adelaide campus, and the proposed demolition of 10 Murray Street, Hobart, designed by Hartley Wilson and Bolt in 1963 – as discussed by Paul Johnston in AR113, December 2009. As a small volunteer group, what can be achieved by way of advocacy is limited; however, expressions of expert opinions that sit outside of self-interested individuals or government heritage bodies can potentially play a positive role in provoking public conservation debates.



One of several cubby houses constructed by the children at the school.



A mezzanine makes a secret place connected to the classroom, but apart from the general flow of activity.



The library, a second storey addition to the original school building, constructed in 1975.

students feel relaxed and unthreatened by their environment, but also energised and enchanted. The school's imaginative environs were in no small part inspired by Borland's view of the children as clients and active generators of the program. John Kenny and Bernard Brown, who worked in Borland's office and were part of the Docomomo tour, both recalled how they were instructed to learn about design by watching children at play in the school. They saw the buildings they were involved in designing for the campus as extending opportunities for play and learning: external stairs become a ship's prow; a mezzanine accessible only by a ladder, and hardly big enough for children to stand up in, makes a secret place connected to the classroom and yet apart from the general flow of activity.

Frank Moore, the former acting principal of the school, told us that it was not so much the permanent architecture, but rather the many cubby-houses and ropes hanging from trees that made the most immediate impact on him when deciding to teach at Preshil. The school grounds signified risky and inspired vision. Elaborate cubbies constructed out of found bits and pieces are still very much in evidence today and used as child-directed projects in maths, construction and group-work. To our current risk-averse society they are disconcertingly dangerous – and therein holds their charm and value.

Much learning does happen outside of the classroom – also a long tradition in the open-air schools of Europe – with chaotic activity occurring not just in designated playgrounds but also under buildings, in trees, and hidden away in the many nooks and crannies of the busy school grounds. Again, the way the school grounds are used seems in contrast to the culture of surveillance

pervading many urban primary schools, where children are not permitted to go where they can't be seen. Spaces, both inside and outside, are designed from a child's perspective; they don't fit an adult comfortably, they create places to hide and they collect dust and dirt.

The lively density of play spaces, trees and buildings is partly due to the size of the campus site, which is not much bigger than a large residential block in Kew. The small scale and intricate geometries of the pavilion-like individual buildings, and their arrangement within the loosely landscaped site, contributes to an illusion of space and scale. The analogy of self-contained pavilions or follies in the landscape was a strategy that Conrad Hamann has suggested was being used by a number of architects contemporary to Borland in Melbourne, who were working with additions to 19th century buildings. The Preshil school buildings seem to operate as garden follies to the surrounding larger mansions of Kew.

Why is the school of architectural and historical interest today? Within Australian terms, it is a key commission in Borland's much-awarded practice that allowed his work and that of his collaborators to be appreciated outside of the domestic realm. In international terms, some attention is now being given to modern schools and their historical and design value; for example, the modernist open-air schools of the Netherlands and the legacy of the English County Council schools of the 1940s and 1950s have recently been well documented by Docomomo and English Heritage.^[103] However, historical documentation to date has included few innovative schools of the 1960s (with the open-planned and community-focused Countesthorpe School by Farmer & Dark, 1967-70, being one

The school's imaginative environs were in no small part inspired by Borland's view of the children as clients and active generators of the program.





Kevin Borland Hall, which boasts a distinctive octagonal plan.

English exception). Within Australia, very few 20th century schools have either been documented or heritage listed – for instance, the primary schools listed on the Victorian Heritage Register are overwhelmingly 19th century examples. A thorough study of architectural innovation in modern Australian schools is therefore timely, particularly with the consequences of current government stimulus funding to school building and maintenance becoming rapidly evident across the nation.

Perhaps, however, of more importance and value than the historical significance of Preshil is its design currency. Many of the architectural principles and design gestures evident here from the 1960s have today come full circle and are again being espoused as innovative: buildings themselves performing as active teaching tools; flexibility of classroom sizes and use; an emphasis on natural materials and gardens; and a growing sustainable agenda being just some of the ideas currently back into play within both education pedagogy and school design. **ar**

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Preshil combines experimental teaching techniques and experimental architecture.



Undercrofts provide extra space in what is a surprisingly small site.

FOOTNOTES

[01] For more definitive sources on Preshil and the architecture of Kevin Borland see D Evans, with H C Borland and C Hamann, *Kevin Borland Architecture From the Heart*, RMIT University Melbourne, 2006; and the Statement of Significance for Preshil School on the Victorian Heritage Register, accessible online.

[02] Andrew Saint, *Towards a Social Architecture: the role of school-building in post-war England*, Yale University Press, 1987, p. 40.

[03] Elaine Harwood, *England's Schools: History, Architecture and Adaptation*, English Heritage, 2010.

Margaret E Lyttle, Principal 1944 - 1994

Children are magic