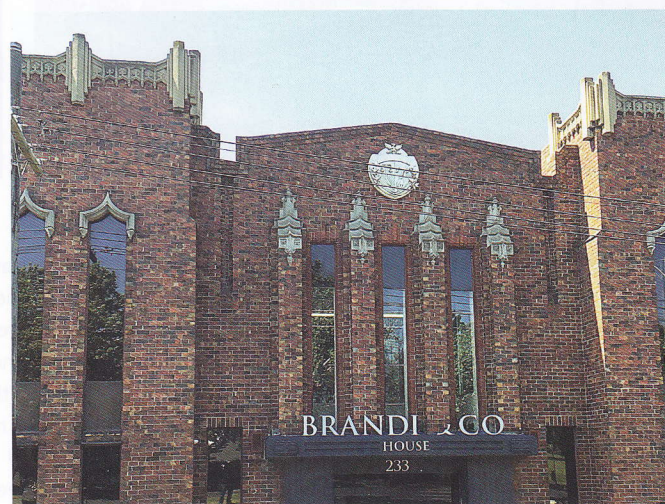
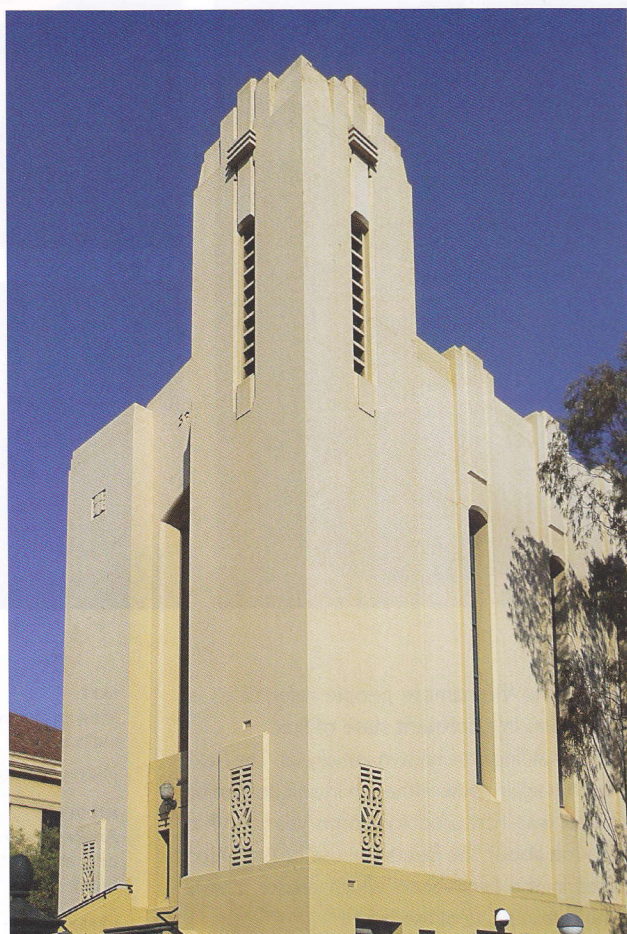


FOUR ART DECO CHURCHES

Rohan Storey



LEFT:
Wesley College Chapel,
Punt Road, Prahran
Image: David Thompson

UPPER RIGHT:
Roof line detail of the
former Pentecostal
Melbourne Apostolic
Church, Punt Road,
Richmond

Image: Robin Grow

LOWER RIGHT:
Former Pentecostal
Melbourne Apostolic
Church, Punt Road,
Richmond

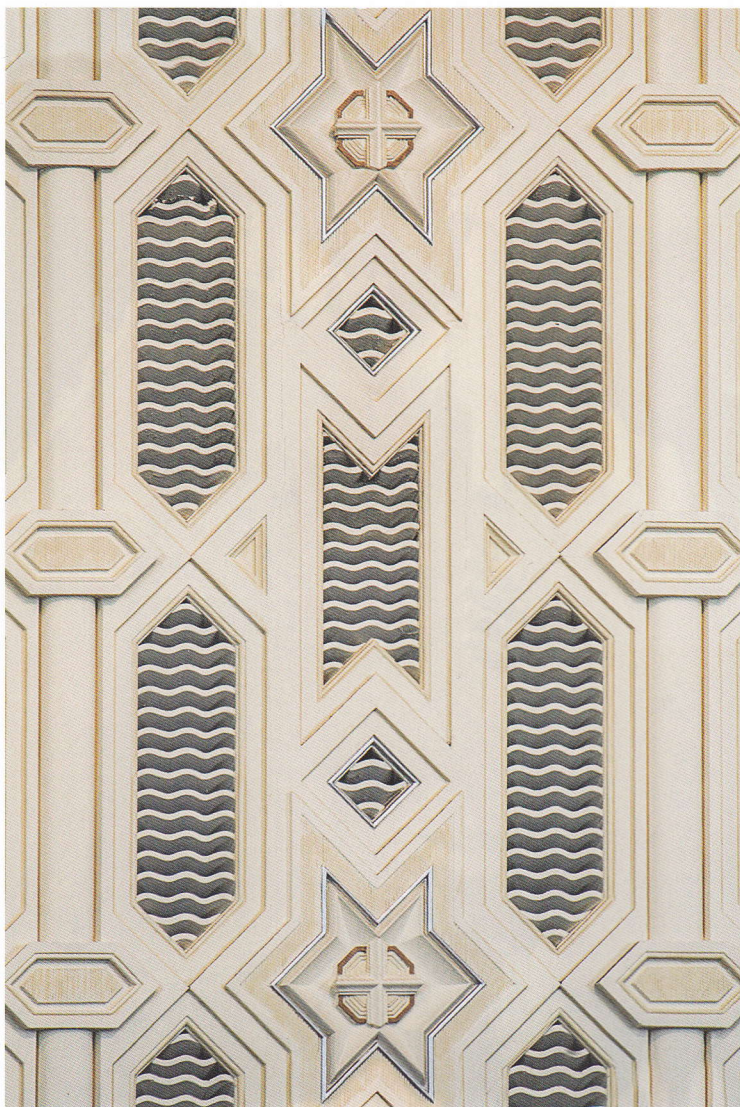
Image: Robin Grow

Researching post-war modernist churches recently, I found that many churches in the 1950s and even into the 1960s were pretty much carrying on the pre-war tradition of simple, restrained, face-brick Arts & Crafts Gothic. I realised that church design in Victoria in the interwar years was so dominated by this Arts & Crafts Gothic that very few could even be described as Art Deco, at a time when this was by far the most popular style for commercial, industrial and apartment buildings (not so much for houses). There are however three outstanding pre-war Art Deco churches, all interesting in different ways; there is also one built post-war, in a style that could easily have been built before the war.

Wesley College Chapel on Punt Road is passed by thousands of commuters (like myself) every day, who, like me, have probably never gone in. The Chapel was built as part of a large-scale rebuilding of the school that started in 1934, funded by the Nicholas brothers, of Aspro fame, who both had sons at the school.¹ The rebuilding was designed by the prolific Harry Norris; the Nicholas's had commissioned Norris to design the grand Nicholas Building in Swanston Street in the 1920s, and Alfred engaged him to design the fabulous Art Deco Burnham Beeches in the nearby Dandenong ranges in 1930, so naturally his services came with the funding. The main school buildings were

designed on neoclassical lines, but the Chapel, opened on 3rd March 1936, was very much of its time.² The overall massing is much like the Arts & Crafts churches of the period, with a tall front elevation incorporating a single large deeply inset window and entry, and an engaged corner tower. The details however are very much Art Deco while retaining the vertical spirit of the Gothic revival, with its tall narrow stepped-top panels that break up the side elevations, the stepped top of the tower and the patterned panels either side of the main door. The interior is a single barrel vaulted space with round arched windows each end. The only purely traditional element, apart from stained glass windows, is the Gothic lettering of the school's motto high up on the front wall: 'SAPERE AUDE' – Dare to be Wise.

Probably the most celebrated Art Deco church in Victoria is the Second Church of Christ Scientist, opposite Camberwell Railway Station, completed in late 1936. As one of the most 'modern' branches of Christianity (established in 1879), the Christian Scientists came to adopt modern styles of church building well before other faiths, and this church was almost radically modern. The architects Bates Smart McCutcheon designed bold stepped masses of modern cream-brick, relieved only by inset horizontal bands, fronted by a stylised classical portico of three decorative wrought iron door/windows, running the full two storeys



and opening into a spacious foyer. The church itself, on the first floor above the Sunday School, was described as “the essence of simplicity”, with perfectly plain walls, theatre-style padded seating, and sky lights concealed above a section of scalloped ceiling.³ This allowed the focus to be on the extraordinary diamond patterned wall, which functions as the organ grill, behind the altar.⁴ The church won the coveted RVIA Street Architecture Medal of 1938.⁵

The third church is the most interesting of all, and also sits on Punt Road, near Bridge Road. It's been converted to offices for a long time, currently occupied by an accounting firm. I had some idea it was built as a funeral parlour, but the striking brick building with delicate details was built as the new home of the Pentecostal Melbourne Apostolic Church, opening on the 8th April 1939.⁶ Costing £8000, it relies for effect on the use of textured clinker brick, toothed at the sides of the tall windows, and limited but delicately detailed stucco decoration, which is all scalloped and stepped ‘Gothic’ though none of it is literally Gothic, being counter-curved or angular. It was designed by E L Warner, who is best known for this design, and who had designed two churches and a hall for the Baptist Church, which also incorporate clinker brick and unusual detailing but are far more historicist. Simon Reeves suggests that this design may have been influenced by the 1920s churches

of US architect Barry Byrne. These were highly individual creations, all in face brick, with tall narrow windows and decoration limited to the angular delicate and practically spiky window tops, projecting narrow piers and across the parapets. Byrne's churches and this one share features with the brick expressionism of 1920s northern Germany, though Byrne's work was developed at the same time. Sadly the conversion of this church, which might have involved inserting a new floor, certainly involved the replacement of the curved chevron leadlight windows with plain dark glass, though some smaller windows survive intact at the rear.

The last church is one that was actually built after WWII, and is far more traditional than the others, but also modern and Art Deco, all in one package. Our Lady of Good Counsel in Deepdene was designed by regular Catholic Church architect Lionel San Miguel, cost £65,000, and was the largest Catholic Church erected since the war up to that time.⁷ Completed in 1955, the traditional-style nave and dominant tower front were executed in cream brick, unadorned except for some detailing along the eaves and around the tall narrow windows; while the proportions and form are Gothic, there are no pointed windows, instead they are topped with low arches (while inside there are large semi-circular relieving arches creating an arcade effect). The most striking feature is the stepped

LEFT:
Detail of the extraordinary patterned wall, which functions as the organ grill, behind the altar.

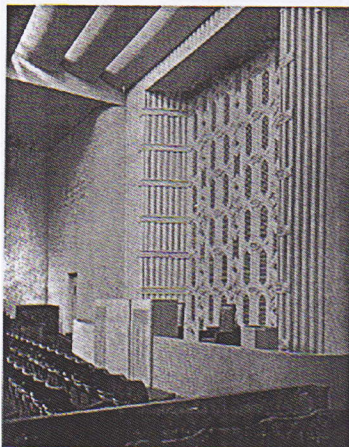
Image Brian Scott

UPPER RIGHT:
Second Church of Christ Scientist, Camberwell (1936), grill & façade detail
Image: Christopher Biggs, Stephen Norris

LOWER RIGHT:
Second Church of Christ Scientist, Camberwell (1936)

Image: David Thompson

FIBROUS PLASTER AsP INTERIORS



ORGAN SCREEN
AND
WAIVED CEILING
SECOND CHURCH,
CHRIST SCIENTIST,
CAMBERWELL,
VICTORIA.

ARCHITECTS:
PATER, SMART &
MCCUTCHEN.

FIBROUS PLASTER
BY FROTON MOF
KING & SON PTY.
LTD.

Every requirement in
Architectural forms
may be expressed by
the use of Plaster and
Fibrous Plaster—which
produces a sharpness
of profile, and clarity
in detail—effects not
easily procurable with
other finishes.

THE FIBROUS
PLASTER INDUSTRY
IS AN AUSTRALIAN
INDUSTRY.

For National Catalogue, or address of your local Fibrous Plaster Manufacturer, write or call
AUSTRALIAN GYPSUM
PRODUCTS PTY. LTD. & WARATAH PLASTER

Manufacturers of
VICORIA
MELBOURNE - Phone AD 5132
SYDNEY - Phone MW 1512
PERTH - Phone 8132
ADELAIDE - Phone L 5049
NEWCASTLE - Phone N 1047



UPPER LEFT:

Advertisement for the
Second Church of Christ
Scientist, Camberwell in
Decoration & Glass
June 1937

RIGHT:

Our Lady of Good
Counsel (1955),
Deepdene Road,
Deepdene

Image: David Thompson

LOWER LEFT:

Interior of the
Pentecostal Melbourne
Apostolic Church, Punt
Road, Richmond, 1940

Image: Rohan Storey

top to the square tower, executed in off-white terra cotta, surmounted by a tall cross clad in that most modern of materials, aluminium. Inside, the ceiling is plain and low pitched, lined with copper-coloured acoustic tiles, another modern yet traditional touch. In late 2016, Law Architects designed alterations and additions, creating a more multi-function space, whilst retaining the church almost completely intact.⁸ New flooring, seating and lighting, and some doorways into a larger foyer on one side were all that was needed to update the church to meet changing needs.

There are Art Deco churches in other states, but not many. The Christian Scientists were in the vanguard, with the striking stone clad volume of Perth's 1939 First Church of Christ Scientist by Ochiltree & Hargrave, and Brisbane's cream brick stylised classical 1940 First Church by Lucas and Cumming. In Ipswich, the 1870s Baptist Church got a stylish Art Deco makeover in 1938 designed by George Brockwell Gill. Other churches were built that are still clearly Gothic, but contain a large dose of Deco detailing or stylisation. My favourite is probably the massive brick St Paul's Manuka in Canberra, built 1939, designed by Burcham Clamp and Son (though the great octagonal spire is 1950s), but the delicate verticality and stepped profile of the reinforced concrete in St Mary's South Perth is also

appealing. Designed by Herbert Parry, it was built in 1931, making it the earliest example of Art Deco in religious architecture in Australia.

After WWII, churches continued to be built in historicist Gothic styles, but striking modernist designs appeared in the early 1950s. By the early 1960s, churches were practically vying with each other to establish a modern, contemporary image, finally taking the leap into the modern age that had begun so tentatively in the 1930s.

ENDNOTES

- 1 "The New Wesley College", *The Argus*, 27 February 1937
- 2 "College Chapel Dedicated", *The Age*, 2 March 1936
- 3 "Second Church of Christ Scientist: Unusual Features of Victorian Building", *The Advocate*, 10 September 1936
- 4 Photographs of the interior can be found on the Organ Historical Trust of Australia entry for the church <http://www.ohta.org.au/organs/organs/CamberwellChristSci.html>
- 5 Second Church of Christ Scientist, Victorian Heritage Database entry.
- 6 "Apostolic Church: New Headquarters Opened", *The Age*, 8 April 1939
- 7 "New Church For Deepdene Parish", *The Advocate*, 11 March 1954
- 8 Crafti, Stephen, "Church engages with community and landscape," *The Age*, 15 July 2017