

SHAPING MELBOURNE \ WITH NEIL CLEREHAN



**SOL
SAPIR**

Born Melbourne
in 1940
RMIT
faculty
1958-1962

A fortnightly
series on
architects who
have influenced
the way we live.

Between Luna Park and Albert Park and 1965 and 1969, a new form of housing was created – the middle-range high-rise flat.

Until then high living had been enjoyed only by the occupants of a few buildings in the CBD, South Yarra and Toorak and 17 (now 16) Housing Commission towers. Then it all began to change.

The second postwar boom was getting underway. The only planning controls required one car space per flat.

Sol Sapir was a bright RMIT student. On completion of his course, newly married and impatient to design and build, he didn't complete the requisite office experience and instead set up the architectural practice he still runs today.

He has a long record of quality buildings. His unrealised proposal for the replacement of Prince Henry's Hospital would have been a Melbourne landmark. His recent transformation of a mundane motel at Royal Domain into a sparkling apartment tower is another example of his talents.

In 1964 Sapir teamed up with Nathan Beller, an established real-estate agent, and Martin Sachs, a successful commercial builder. Their first projects were two nine-storied towers in Alfred Square, St Kilda.

Using new, high-compressive bricks, the buildings had no columns: conventional house construction multiplied by nine.

The team progressed to concrete construction. In Beaconsfield Parade, their towers at No.333 (in St Kilda West) and No.189 (Middle Park) were revolutionary.

The concrete central lift and stair cores were built with steel slip formwork that was jacked up floor by floor. The facades were precast concrete units – one per room.

This innovation gave a new architectural expression to the buildings. The floor slabs were constructed with the American lift-slab principle.

The tower at No.333 would have started as a 16-decker concrete sandwich, with the slabs being jacked into position. Those radical, efficient methods of construction are now outlawed. But their engineer went on to develop many novel uses of concrete slabs.

Selling off the plan was not permitted. The flats were presented, complete with blinds and carpet, to an unenthusiastic public.

Although money was cheap and the effects of the infamous 1960 credit squeeze were over, the new product was too radical. Most of the eventual buyers were migrants, used to high living and welcoming a water view. It took a few years for the new form of accommodation to be really appreciated.

No.333 was a pioneer in another aspect. An overheated oven caused a fire on level 14 but new, untested, fire-proofing regulations proved more than adequate.

The fire was confined to the kitchen, although 42 other flats had to be refurbished because of water damage.

The group spread its wings in a controlled, Melbourne way: the tower at 189 Beaconsfield Parade was replicated in Sydney Street, Prahran, and then One Orrong Road was another dramatic newcomer – Beller occupied what was probably genteel Armadale's first penthouse.

A subsequent re-numbering of Orrong Road spoilt things; 405 just doesn't have the same cachet as One.

As the decade closed, a unique design-build-sell partnership dissolved, leaving inner-Melbourne with about 30 towers, a new look and a new way of life.



(MARK ROZIN)



(MATTHEW MALLETT)

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