

FORM

FORM

IT LANDED IN BRIGHTON...

Brighton Municipal Offices

Daniella Casamento

Kevin Knight serves tea and homemade ANZAC biscuits at an antique timber dining table passed down from his late wife's family. As the mid-afternoon sun warms our backs through the floor to ceiling windows, Knight explains that by the age of 12 he knew he wanted to be an architect.

After winning a scholarship to study architecture and the fundamentals of construction and engineering at RMIT, and then transferring to the University of Melbourne to complete an architectural design subject, Knight combined study with work in the offices of Clive Lord and Harry Winbush. "It's amazing when you think about it," he says. "At that age I had already designed a block of units down at Geelong, seen the client, done the drawings and got the job on the go before I was in the army. And I was only 18 and a half at the time."

Now 70 years later he is still a practicing architect with a vast home office. Five sets of horizontal plan filing drawers line one wall of his "cubby house." The main drawing board, desk and layout tables are layered with sheets of detail drawings of projects in development. Three rolls of yellow tracing paper lie within reach and technical brochures cover a nearby tennis table. "I'm continually studying," Knight says. "I'm all the time trying to improve and make things better. I can't help myself."

It's clear that the principle of form follows function guided Knight to simultaneously tease out the design of his home while allowing for the natural falls of the land and the outlook of neighbouring properties.

Knight became a partner of Oakley and Parkes and Partners in 1956 after returning from two years in London. In 1959 the firm was engaged to prepare designs for the Brighton Municipal Offices which was completed by Prentice Builders



Exterior, Brighton Municipal Offices.



Brighton Municipal Offices.



Council chamber, Brighton Municipal Offices.

in 1961 at a cost of £160,000. This month, the Bayside City Council is celebrating the building with an exhibition of Knight's architectural drawings and sketches and original Featherston chairs used in the council chamber.

Briefed by the council engineer and the town clerk on the council's requirements for the new building, Knight then focused on the site constraints. The existing street parking, mature Moreton Bay Fig trees

that lined Boxshall Street at the time, surrounding residential buildings and the fall of the land were the controlling aspects of the site.

"I knew I had to tuck the building in under the trees and keep the scale down because of the residential area," explains Knight, adding that he didn't want to build up to the house on the west boundary. An extension designed by another architect did this sometime later. Despite the

council's tree curator giving the Moreton Bay Figs a clean bill of health, they were found to be riddled with dry rot and removed after a large branch fell in a storm during construction.

Within a few weeks of beginning work on the project, Knight arranged to present his sketches to the entire council and committee after a visiting colleague suggested that the client would have difficulty understanding his radical design. His aim was simply to seek approval for the concept. "I had the roughest sketches which no one understood. So I described the building to them, what I wanted to do and why I wanted to do it and I said I'm here to get approval to do sketch plans and estimates." Instead, Knight was given approval to go straight into working drawings and three months to complete them. "In effect I was designing that building and doing working drawings at the same time."

Guided by his understanding of the functions of the council chamber, "it turned out that I wanted a round room of a given size which I discovered was about so," he explains. That gave

the ground floor sufficient space to allocate to the various council departments.

Knight's experience in commercial office design gave him the idea for the open workspace and one main customer service desk. On the floor above and at one corner of the building, he allocated a staffroom with roof deck. "I made a nice little glass box for them," he laughs.

The Brighton Municipal Building incorporates many new building technologies of the time, most of which were selected due to Knight's clear vision of how he wanted the building to perform. However, Knight had to walk away from some of his innovative ideas.

Advice from the building industry ruled out precast concrete panels for the outer skin of the building. Knight's focus turned to using traditional bricks, although he was wary of reports describing startling problems resulting from brick growth that occurred in new buildings constructed after the war. "I did some study and found that a large part

of the growth occurs in the first three months so it meant I had to use bricks that were at least three months old." Knight made his selection at the brick yard and directed the supplier to hold them until required. As often happens when materials are finally due at site, he found that the bricks had been sold. Knight sourced an alternative of the same colour and although they did not have the same degree of colour variation that he preferred, these bricks had sat long enough in the yard.

The cavity between the inner and outer brickwork skin of the building was filled with expanded shale concrete eliminating the need for expansion joints and water proofing. The lightweight concrete roof over the council chamber was formed by custom designed fishtail trusses. Innovative fibreglass skylights are a feature of the council chamber ceiling. The interior walls are lined with perforated timber veneer panels detailed to solve acoustic issues of the round room and cable ducts, concealed in the concave floor of the council chamber, reticulate power and telephone services to the fixed desks.

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The air-conditioning system was also designed to be concealed. "I don't show ducts at all in a building if I can avoid it," Knight says. "On top of that we used a reversed cycle system and that was something new at that scale." The external stairs at the Boxshall Street forecourt form a louver system for the building's airflow. "All that is the air intake and then there is an air exhaust on the south side hidden behind the greenery."

Light switches were kept to a minimum with "circuit breakers on sub switchboards which were the actual switches as well." Knight proposed copper piping for the sewerage work instead of the standard cast iron and specified wall hung urinals for the first time. "I had great fun with the Board of Works over that." An agricultural drainage system was also implemented around the perimeter of the building.

Knight worked closely with the structural, mechanical and electrical engineers to achieve his clear vision of a technically and structurally progressive building. What appears effortless is rarely so.

INFORMATION

It landed in Brighton: Modernism and the Municipal Offices is on display until August 5

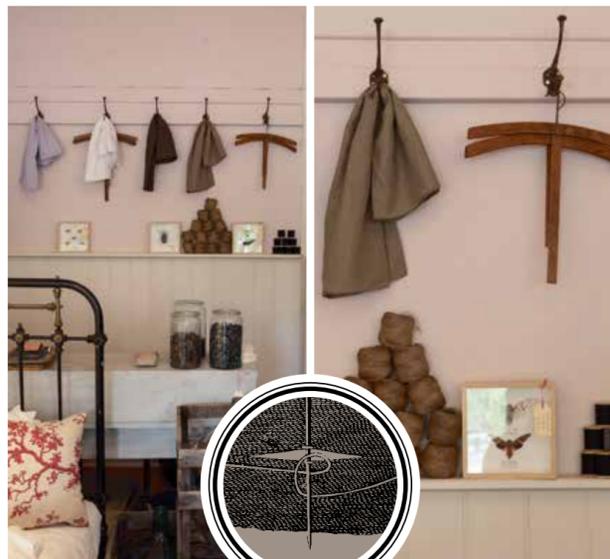
Tour A: Saturday 7 July at 2pm

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Tour B: Saturday 4 August at 2pm

This tour is followed by afternoon tea with the architect.

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