Essay: Jake Taylor and Tony Lee

QUAMBY

Perched on a cliff edge at the end of Glover Court, a quiet cul-de-sac in Toorak, Quamby is a building which elegantly responds to and harnesses a difficult site. The second project in Grounds' Four Flats series, it follows on from the humble origins of Clendon to create a more sophisticated example of the bachelor flat as it introduces and showcases the strong geometries that would define Grounds' future architectural work.

The shape

The slope

North aspect

Quamby comprises six one-bedroom bachelor flats and a three-bedroom maisonette. The project was commissioned by Walter Champion, a grazier, who settled his purchase of the land in August 1940 just a month before Grounds completed the working drawings in September. The maisonette was to be Champion's city residence while the six flats were to be rental investments. In June 1941 Grounds became the first tenant, occupying flat six as his city home and office.

Working from Quamby, Grounds completed Moonbria, the last of the Four Flats series, while also designing a pair of maisonettes for Clive Ross Fenner along with additions to the Florentino restaurant and a new house for the Massoni family. With a city office, Grounds was able to recruit help and a young Robin Boyd, studying at the University of Melbourne, was employed as his assistant and draughtsman. Grounds became Boyd's mentor and his influence is evident in Boyd's post-war projects which often adopted minimum flat planning and replicated Grounds joinery details.

Grounds' design for Quamby responds to both the curving cul-de-sac frontage and the sharp downward slope at the rear of the site. The result is a building that perches as a natural extension of the rocky hilltop with enviable views from all flats looking northward over parklands and the Yarra River to the city beyond. The building's position at the end of the cul-de-sac generates its radial footprint, most obviously in the two-storey concave façade of the maisonette that greets visitors in the court. Beyond this, the six flats fan out in plan and step down the steep site to culminate in an embedded bomb shelter and shared laundry at the base (later converted to another flat). The curved layout maximises the liveable footprint on the site in a manner that prioritises each flat's connection to the northern views.

Primarily a brick structure with flat timber framed roofs, the building steps down the hillside resting on a combination of buff coloured stonework that was extracted from the site, together with expressed reinforced concrete cantilevered beams. Emphasising its connection to the site the stonework also appears as a feature element on the street-facing wall adjacent to the maisonette entry door and a retaining wall leading to the entries of the flats. Reinforced concrete, in general use for commercial buildings but rarely in residential projects at the time, was a new addition to Grounds' structural palette that assisted him to maximise the number and size of the flats as they cantilever over the precipitous site.