The Tecton Group and Architects' Group: Residues of Collective Practice

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The Architect's Group was a "collective" practice formed in Brisbane in 1946, contemporaneous with the establishment of the Architectural Group, the student initiative announced in Auckland that year, and precursor to Group Architects. The Brisbane collective took cues from the Tecton Group established in the United Kingdom in 1932, described as an "opportunistic collaboration," initially between Berthold Lubetkin, and six recent graduates of the Architectural Association (AA). Tecton Group was a precursor to other collective endeavours in the inter-war period in the United Kingdom, and The Architects' Collaborative (TAC) set up in 1945 in the United States.[1]

This paper will examine the transferal of ideas and ethos, as well as other equivalences, the close relationships with educational institutions, modes of practice, and the projects produced by the Architects' Group. This will allow a consideration of the consequences of this approach read in the context of Australasian architectural culture, and how it was a rehearsal for later approaches to corporate practice, that consolidated the decisive shift in architectural culture from public to private practice.

Keywords: collective practice; twentieth century modernism; post-war architecture; Modern architecture; Queensland architectural culture

In 1950 an unidentified house project completed by the Architects' Group in Brisbane, was selected to illustrate an article written by Robin Boyd and Peter Newell for *Architect*, the journal of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects. This house was one of sixteen examples of the housing revolution they reported was taking place in the suburb of St Lucia, "seeking answers to Brisbane's special housing problems without reference to stylistic precedent."[2] Other houses illustrated were by local architects Hayes and Scott, Frank Salmon, John Butler, Vitale Gzell, Karl Langer, Peter Newell, Gordon Banfield, Chambers and Ford, and David Bell (fig. 1).

The published photograph reveals the house to have been a timber construction, with an L-figure plan comprised of a tall asymmetric extruded-gable-roof form with built-in garage— unusual for the time —and a mono roof addition set back from the street (fig. 2). The front door addressed, what appears from the photograph to be, an unsealed road. The photo represents the only known published project by the Architects' Group.

An announcement heralding their formation as a collective of "architects and town-planning consultants" with the objective of "pooling knowledge and experience in one office," appeared in Brisbane's *Sunday Mail* in March 1946.[3] Despite this auspicious start, and unlike their more famous counterparts in New Zealand, the Architectural Group, which were a student-led initiative based in Auckland that prefigured the practice Group Architects, the activities of the Architects' Group have gone unreported. In the *Sunday Mail*, the founders were listed as Bruce Lucas, Heinz Jacobsohn, Rod Voller, Colin Trapp, and Ron Voller. It noted that Robert Cummings, then Lecturer

1 Andrew Reed Tripp, "Lubetkin and the Tecton Group," (PhD Diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2017), 25.

2 Robin Boyd, and Peter Newell, "St Lucia. A Housing Revolution," *Architecture* 38, no. 3 (July 1950): 109.

3 "Architects' Group Established Here," *Sunday Mail* (Brisbane), March 10, 1946, 6.
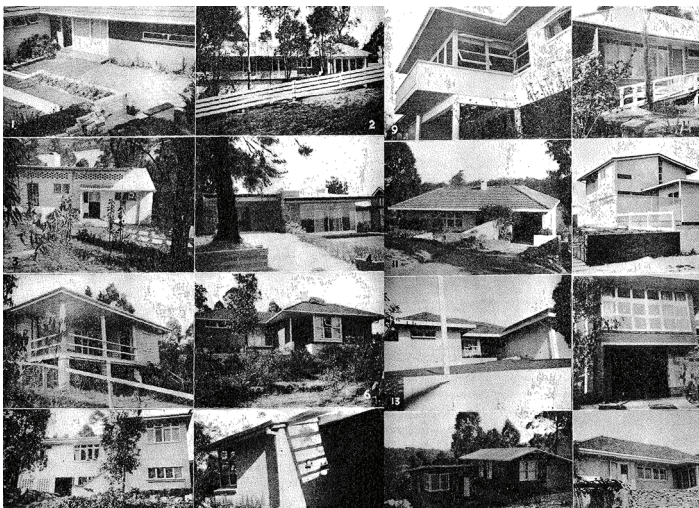
Figure 1. Photographs of the 16 Houses published. (Reprinted from Robin Boyd and Peter Newell, "St Lucia. A Housing Revolution," *Architecture* 38, no. 3 (July 1950): 109.)

Figure 2. Detail photograph of the house attributed to the Architects' Group. (Reprinted from Robin Boyd and Peter Newell, "St Lucia. A Housing Revolution," 109.)

in Architecture at the University of Queensland, would also be associated and that Lucas, Trapp and Ron Voller would not initially be active full-time members due to their employment in "public departments."[4] Karl Langer, the Austrian architect who arrived in Brisbane in 1939, had been invited to join, and his short account in a letter to Sydney-based architect John Moore, six months prior, provides some insight into the formation of the group. Langer was concerned about the collective ethos and economic viability of such a venture given the number of people involved.[5]

4 "Architects' Group Established Here," 6.

5 Karl Langer Collection, UQFL158 Box 36, Fryer Library, University of Queensland, Box 36. Letter dated 17 September 1945, to Sydney architect John D Moore.

As Langer wrote:

> *A group of architects on the lines of Tecton is about to be formed here and they take it for granted that I will be a member. It consists of Mr Lucas, Cummings as consulting member, because he is frightened he may loose [sic] his university job if he becomes full member, Mr Voller, and a former student of mine, and a German refugee architect. I don't quite know what to do as it has advantages and also disadvantages. Considering that you "marry" your partners including their wives, I think it will be a pretty big family and as I know only two of them well, I am a bit scared. The basis is communistic if you call it so, the bringing of jobs is not considered as gainful activity, only the work done. The legal basis is association of the members and profits and expenses are to be shared equally. If it was only three of them it would be ideal.*[6]

6 Langer Collection.

Tecton Group, or Tecton, formed by Berthold Lubetkin and recent graduates of the Architectural Association (AA) in London in 1932, are revealed to be the initial impetus behind

the idea of the collective. It brought together recent graduate Colin Trapp; Voller and Voller, a partnership between cousins Roderic and Ronald Voller formed months prior; Bruce Lucas and Robert Cummings, who had attended the AA in the 1920s, established a partnership in 1936 and were colleagues at the University of Queensland; and finally the Polish-born Heinz Jacobsohn, a former student of Paul Bonatz in Stuttgart, and who worked for Ernst Freud, son of Sigmund and Martha Freud, in Berlin before the war.[7]

Jacobsohn initially settled in Perth, and established a partnership with Margaret Pitt Morison from 1938 until 1942, before relocating to Brisbane, where he secured a temporary position with the drawing office in the Brisbane City Council's Planning and Building Department alongside Roderic Voller.[8] Later he moved to Greece to work with architect, town planner and urban theorist Constantinos Doxiadis (1914–1975), who had briefly relocated to Wacol, outside of Ipswich, near Brisbane, in 1952, before returning to Greece in 1953.[9] Roderic Voller was a graduate of the Brisbane Central Technical College (CTC) in 1931. He articled his cousin Ronald for one year in 1932, prior to his graduation in 1936, and employment with the Queensland Department of Public Works (1933-1937). Ronald then took a position with the Commonwealth Department of Works in Perth in 1938, before returning to Brisbane in 1946.

Although no evidence of any interaction has come to light, it would seem probable that the younger Voller met Jacobsohn during his relocation to Perth during the war.[10] Trapp was the student Langer made reference to in his letter to Moore. He graduated from the Diploma course of the University of Queensland in 1944, where Langer had taught since 1940.[11]

The profiles of the members of the Architects' Group make it clear that the collective was comprised of local and established figures: an inter-connected cohort of lecturers and architects with substantial experience gained between the wars, and during World War Two. This circumstance would have been further compounded had Langer decided to accept the invitation to join. Cummings, Lucas, and Jacobsohn were all of similar age, Rod Voller a decade younger, with Ron Voller and Trapp the only recent graduates and the youngest members. As Langer recounted, the ambition of the collective was to establish a profitable venture, with profits shared equally amongst members.

In New Zealand, the formation of the Architectural Group coincided with "post-war austerity, and the associated paucity of

7 Jon Voller, "Vale Ronald James Voller 1915-2006," *Architecture Australia* (May/June 2006): 44; "Architectural Partnership," *Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), September 15, 1936; "Naturalisation Notices," *Daily News* (Perth), December 9, 1942, 7.

8 Bronwyn Hanna, "Australia's Early Women Architects: Milestones and Achievements," *Fabrications: The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand* 12, no. 1 (2002): 40; "Three Architects for City Appointed," *Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), September 12, 1944, 3; "Council Appoints Architects," *Telegraph* (Brisbane), September 19, 1944, 3.

9 Peter Trundle, "Greek Engineer Turns Model Farmer. *His Tomatoes Proved the Theory Worked*," *Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), March 11, 1953, 2.

10 Donald Watson, and Judith McKay, *A Directory of Queensland Architects to 1940*, (St Lucia, Qld.: University of Queensland, Fryer Memorial Library Occasional Publication no. 5, 1984), 196.

11 Faculty of Architecture, University of Queensland. Register of Students, 1937–1966.

materials," and a "call for a New Zealand architecture," followed by a campaign in support of the idea of "The Small House,"[12] led by key protagonist William Wilson. This was alongside a general interest in the potential of vernacular architecture, the "'early New Zealand wooden house,'" in particular "the important social space of the veranda," and the simplicity of early homes—themes that had parallels in Australia.[13]

In Queensland—as in other parts of Australasia—the period immediately after the war marked a decisive shift in architectural culture from public to private practice. However, most architects in Queensland at this time were employed by the Queensland Department of Public Works, the Queensland Branch of the Commonwealth Works Department, the newly formed Queensland Housing Commission, or the Brisbane City Council's Planning and Building Department.

In 1946, twenty-six architects and partnerships in private practice were listed in the *Queensland Post Office Commercial Directory*.[14] The profile of private practice was not precisely mapped by these listings so soon after the war, and this was further complicated by private architects not listing at all or those operating between private practice and public service not noted. The majority of those listed, however, had been trained interstate or overseas, or had some involvement with the Queensland Department of Public Works.[15]

Tecton Group, London

Tecton was formed roughly one year after Robert Cummings returned to Australia from the United Kingdom in December 1930.[16] Berthold Lubetkin, who arrived in London from the Soviet Union in 1931, faced the prospect of being unable to practise in the United Kingdom, due to Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) restrictions related to registration. He then formed Tecton in London in 1932, after an invitation to speak at the Architectural Association (AA), with Godfrey Samuel, Val Harding, Michael Dugdale, Anthony Chitty, Francis Skinner, and Lindsay Drake.[17] As recent architectural graduates, they had little practice-experience, but were eligible for registration.

Tecton was the first group practice in England, and became a model for other English collective practices, and in the United States somewhat later, groups such as The Architects' Collaborative (TAC), formed "to develop a new 'technique of collaboration' in teams," by Benjamin Thompson, Jean Bodman

12 William Wilson, "The Small House," *Kiwi: The Annual Magazine of the Students' Association of the Auckland University College, New Zealand*, vol. 43 (November 1948): 27–33; Julia Gatley and Bill McKay, "'Overseas Solutions Will Not Do': Calls for a New Zealand Architecture," in Gatley, ed., *Group Architects: Towards a New Zealand Architecture* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2010), 21. In New Zealand the small house, standardisation, and mass-production were viewed as strategies to take design "beyond the 'bourgeoisie.'"

13 Gatley and McKay, "'Overseas Solutions Will Not Do,'" 25.

14 *Queensland Post Office Commercial Directory* (Brisbane: H. Wise and Company), 1946.

15 Five architects listed: J.N. Arundel, George Hutton, John Millar, W.J. Moulds, and C.E. Plant were all employed by the Queensland Government. See Donald Watson and Judith McKay, *A Directory of Queensland Architects to 1940*, (Brisbane: Fryer Memorial Library Occasional Publication no. 5, 1984).

16 "Australian Style. Future of Architecture," *Brisbane Courier*, December 11, 1930, 21.

17 Joe Kerr, "Obituary: William Tatton Brown," *Independent* (London), February 10, 1997. The following, among others, were all associated at some time with Tecton: Andre Bouxin, Eileen Murray, Margaret Church, Mary Cooke, Gordon Cullen, Harry Durrell, Carl Ludwig Franck, Fred Lasserre, Wilfred Mallows, Peter Moro, Paul Pascoe, Gerhard Rosenberg, Michael Sheldrake, Aileen Sparrow, William Tatton-Brown and Florian Vischer.

Fletcher, Norman C Fletcher, Sarah Pillsbury Harkness and John Harkness, with Walter Gropius in 1945.[18]

18 "Statement of Aims," in "Program for the Proposed Willimantic Public Library by Architects' Collaborative," *Arts and Architecture* 63 (August 1946): 28.

Tecton rejected the identification of individual architects as author, and conducted their work through collaborative research and analysis.[19] At this time, architects in the United Kingdom entered the profession after a period articled as a salaried assistant.[20] Typically, they found themselves in public practice, working in the engineering or surveying departments of public authorities. The RIBA also actively campaigned to convince local officials to commission architects in private practice as the preferred alternative.

19 Tripp, "Lubetkin and the Tecton Group," 34.

20 Tripp, "Lubetkin and the Tecton Group," 25.

In 1921, a decade prior, the RIBA had established a committee to deal with what they saw as "the increasingly problematic relationship between public and private practice."[21] That same year two other organisations were formed to represent the public sector architect, the Official Architects' Association (OAA), and the Architects' and Surveyors' Assistants' Professional Union (ASAPU). The latter organisation advocated against architecture as an art and argued for a conception of the architect as builder to raise the general standard of design, construction and craft detail of building. They also sought to increase in the standard of living of the (architect) worker.[22] This coincided with an active campaign by the journal, *Architect,* in the United Kingdom, who were against architects in public service, arguing that the acceptance of a wage impinged upon the architect's freedom, and as a consequence, the quality of work produced.[23]

21 SH Walford, "Architecture in Tension," (PhD Diss., Coventry: University of Warwick, 2009), 13.

22 Tripp, "Lubetkin and the Tecton Group," 26.

23 Walford, "Architecture in Tension," 14.

RIBA attempted to protect the title of Architect through the establishment of the Registration Act, which came into force in 1931, which also happened to be the year of Lubetkin's arrival. The ASAPU reconstituted as the Association of Architects, Surveyors, and Technical Assistants (AASTA) and fought the act on the grounds that it did not address a minimum salary scale, overcrowding of the academy and the profession, and the representation of salaried state architects within the RIBA.[24] AASTA leveraged support for the Act in exchange for representation on the RIBA Council. As a consequence, state employed "architectural workers" were disadvantaged by the creation of the Registered Architect category that privileged individuals in practice who met certain technical qualifications, and were therefore deemed expert enough to render architectural services.

24 B Kaye, *The Development of the Architectural Profession in Britain. A Sociological Study*, (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1960), 81.

AASTA promoted the idea of group practice as a way of giving greater responsibility and experience to assistants.[25] It withdrew

25 Tripp, "Lubetkin and the Tecton Group," 38.

from the RIBA Council in 1934, and in 1935 was joined by the Architects and Technicians Organisation (ATO), with members of Tecton holding key positions.[26] Lubetkin saw group practice as offering "an arrangement to sponsor continuous self education."[27]
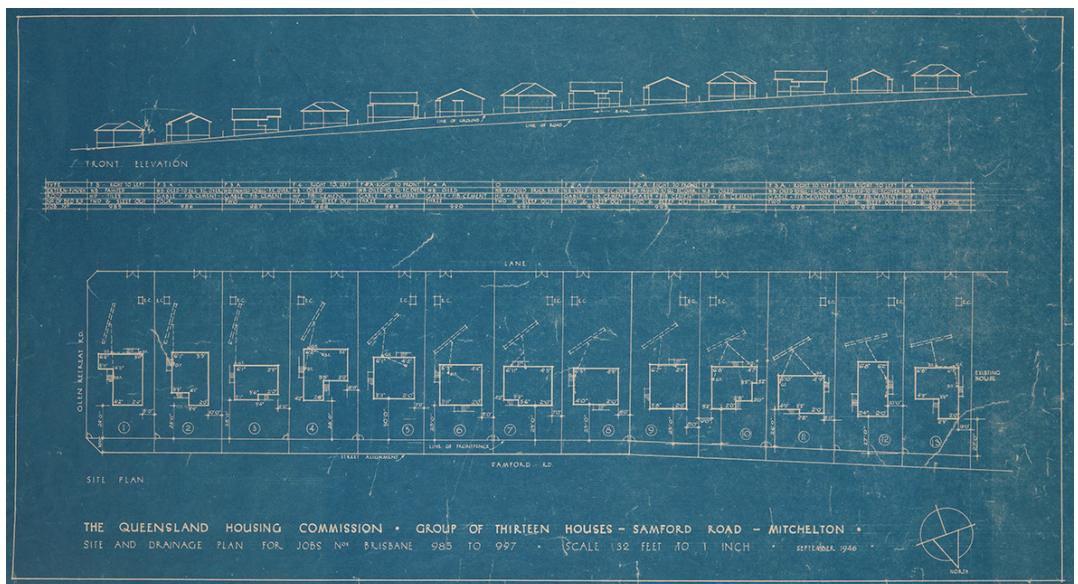
The Architects' Group, Brisbane

The Architects' Group in Brisbane was active between 1946 and 1951, and drew on experiences in public service and private practice to position themselves as an "annex" of the newly formed Queensland Housing Commission. They were dependent on a steady stream of town-planning work, specifically the coordination of block subdivision, site planning, and elaboration of plan and roof variations of clusters of houses to enliven the street, in Brisbane, and for regional centres across the state (fig. 3).[28]

Off the back of these town planning commissions, they attempted to secure commissions for houses and larger projects, but very few were realised. If projects by Tecton such as the Gorilla House (1933) and Penguin Pond (1934) for London Zoo in Regents Park, or Finsbury Health Centre (1938), were also part of the inspiration behind the collective, this did not translate into the work produced. Although the ambition of the Architects' Group was to operate as a collective, evidence suggests that they practised in the manner of a traditional partnership, with Jacobsohn and Ron Voller acting as principals.

26 S Parsons, "Communism in the Professions," (PhD Diss., Coventry: University of Warwick, 1990), 425.

27 Bertold Lubetkin, "Interview," *American Architect and Architecture*, New York, December 1936, 26.

28 Ronald James Voller Collection, Fryer Library, University of Queensland, UQFL622, Folder 6.

Figure 3. Architectural drawing, "Group of Thirteen Houses, Samford Road, Mitchelton." The Queensland Housing Commission. Ronald James Voller Collection, Fryer Library UQFL622, Folder 6. Courtesy Fryer Library, University of Queensland.

However, drawings produced by the Architects' Group did not start to reveal individual architectural authorship until the end of 1949.

In 1946 they were commissioned to develop at least five proposals for modest houses, including the timber Chandler House in Beaudesert, Queensland, that featured two fireplaces and a front porch. The Burke House in Greenslopes, Brisbane, was a proposal for a house with a simple rectilinear plan and a hipped roof rendered in perspective by Ronald Voller. The Bradley House in St Lucia, also in Brisbane, was a house with a flat roof and a central breezeway entry that was reminiscent of the work of American architect Hugh Stubbins (1912-2006). In particular this house was suggestive of his entries into the Realistic House Competition, run by the American journal, *Progressive Architecture*, in 1945.[29] The Bradley House was the only house to be documented in the first year of the Architect's Group collective. The year ended with a refurbishment of their office in the Permanent Building, Queen Street, in Brisbane's central business district, where most architectural partnerships were located at this time.

29 "A Realistic House," *Progressive Architecture* 27, no. 4 (April 1946): 62.

In 1947 the Architects' Group was commissioned to produce at least eight house proposals, and oversaw the construction of Ronald Voller's own house in St Lucia, Brisbane.[30] In February they documented the Bettridge House in Margate, Brisbane, a two-bedroom timber house raised slightly off the ground, with a gently sloping skillion roof and clerestory pop-up box over the main bedroom. Also that month they called tenders for "houses in concrete" in Wellers Hill and a brick house in Corinda, both in Brisbane. In September they tendered a timber residence in Chelmer, Brisbane.[31]

30 Voller Collection, Folder 4.

31 "Tenders," *Architecture, Building Engineering* (February 1947): 55; "Tenders," *Architecture, Building Engineering* (September 1947): 63.

In addition sketch designs for a range of other building types were commissioned by the Queensland government departments and private clients including a new train station for the town of Hughenden, offices for Queensland Druggists in South Brisbane, plans for a Memorial Hall at Stanthorpe, for the Returned Sailors' Soldiers' Airmens' Imperial League of Australia (RSSAILA), Shops and Flats for the Pacific Highway, Surfers Paradise, and an Automobile Centre in Brisbane (1947).[32] None of these were realised.

32 Voller Collection, Folder 4.

In 1948, they were commissioned to coordinate a private estate development by prominent businessman Leon Trout, at Everton Park, Brisbane.[33] They also designed his house on a prime location within the estate, in collaboration with established architect Mervyn Rylance (1906-1983) the following year. Other

33 Voller Collection, Folder 5.

projects in 1948 included at least six house designs, although only one of these, the Kirby House, West End Brisbane, proceeded to construction. The Architects' Group again developed sketch design proposals for more substantial projects that year, including a holiday camp at Broadbeach for the Royal Automobile Club of Queensland (RACQ), and the South Coast Cooperative Dairy.[34]

A design for the Queensland Smelting Works at Everton Park, a controversial facility located in Brisbane's suburban Ashgrove, that had drawn protests from local residents before the war, and was conceived around the relocation of an "igloo hut" attributed to the First Australian Combat Engineers (Works). The igloo was designed from a template provided by United States Army Forces in Australia (USAFIA) and constructed during the war on the site behind a ribbon of residential subdivision as a buffer to the street.[35] A separate steel structure to house the smelter was positioned to the rear of the expansive site behind the igloo (fig. 4).

34 Voller Collection, Folder 5.

35 Voller Collection, Folder 5; "Smelting Works at Ashgrove," *Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), September 10, 1937, 21.

Figure 4. Architectural drawing, "Queensland Battery Smelting Works Pty Ltd." Drawing by The Architects' Group. Ronald James Voller Collection, Fryer Library UQFL622, Folder 5. Courtesy of the Fryer Library, University of Queensland.
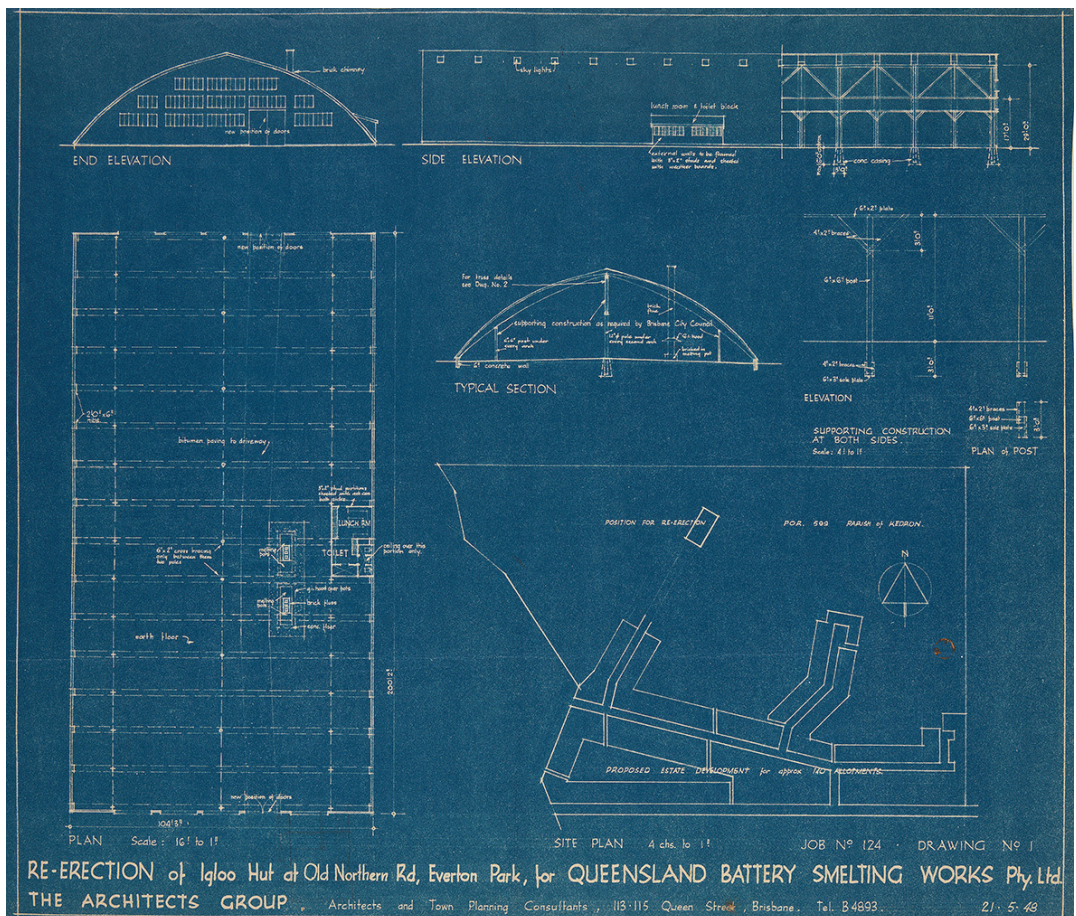
Apart from the collaboration on the New Residence for Leon Trout only one other house proposal was commissioned in 1949, and this was for G. Erzetich in Greenslopes. The Architects' Group also produced site plans for Proposed Offices in Wharf Street, Brisbane, and working drawings for the Returned Services League (RSL) Building and Bowling Club in Maryborough, Queensland. This project led to a commission for the Music Shell and War Memorial Olympic Swimming Pool, also in Maryborough, which was the last Architects' Group projects (fig. 5).[36]

Voller and Jacobsohn were both acknowledged as the architects on drawings produced for these projects, but the scheme did not proceed with these architects due to a change of mayor and a reported lack of funding. Ronald Voller took the projects on in a private capacity, and later submitted a revised proposal that reduced the scope and included renovations to the existing buildings. After protracted negotiations, the council definitively announced that three projects for Maryborough: the Olympic Pool, Music Shell, and War Memorial Park would not proceed.[37]

The Architects' Group sustained a practice for five years, but remained largely out of the public eye. If Tecton was the impetus for Architects' Group, there is no evidence to suggest that—

36 Voller Collection, Folder 7; "Olympic Pool in Maryborough," *Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), November 7, 1949, 3; "Modern Swimming Pool on the Way," *Maryborough Chronicle*, December 7, 1949, 2; "Architects for Swimming Pool," *Maryborough Chronicle*, February 7, 1950, 5.

37 "Revised £60,000 Olympic Pool," *Maryborough Chronicle*, August 23, 1951, 3; "Architect's Report on CCL Schemes," *Maryborough Chronicle*, December 12, 1952, 3; "No Funds: Three Schemes are Out," *Maryborough Chronicle*, February 11, 1953, 3.

Figure 5. Architectural drawing, "War Memorial Olympic Swimming Pool, Maryborough." The Architects' Group. Ronald James Voller Collection, Fryer Library UQFL622, Folder 7. Courtesy of the Fryer Library, University of Queensland.

WAR MEMORIAL OLYMPIC SWIMMING POOL, MARYBOROUGH
for the MARYBOROUGH CITY COUNCIL   ARCHITECTS: H. Jacobsohn A.R.A.I.A., M.T.C.P.I. Ronald J. Voller A.R.I.B.A., A.R.A.I.A., M.T.C.P.I., THE ARCHITECTS GROUP, Brisbane

like Tecton—they were committed to research and analysis as the basis for practice. Rather, the collective was an attempt by university lecturers Cummings and Lucas to maintain a practice profile, and draw on established networks across all levels of government. Given the context of post-war austerity, and paucity of materials and labour that provided the backdrop to their formation, it was a clever strategy to undertake town-planning work for the recently formed Queensland Housing Commission. This gave them a steady income to leverage collaborations with public departments and other architects, and to negotiate architectural commissions with private clients. There is little evidence of the involvement of Lucas, or Trapp, and with Cummings increasingly preoccupied with his University duties, the collective quickly reverted to the partnership model of practice typical of the time.[38] The Architectural Group in Auckland, by contrast, generated significant momentum for cultural change within New Zealand's architectural culture over time. The group sought to reform agenda, texts, practice innovations, and "call for a New Zealand architecture."[39]

With the disappointment of Maryborough, the Architects' Group disbanded late in 1951. Ronald Voller practised for a short period by himself before joining the practice, Bligh Jessup and Partners, in the mid-nineteen fifties.[40] In this new practice setting Ronald Voller made important contributions, perhaps due to the broad range of experiences he had accrued, as a rehearsal for later corporate practice platforms, consolidating the general shift in architectural culture from public to private practice. And finally, as noted earlier, Jacobsohn went to work for Doxiadis in Athens, before later returning to live in Brisbane.

38 "Mostly from the Diaries of RP Cummings," Fryer Manuscript F2350, University of Queensland, 162.

39 Gatley and McKay, "'Overseas Solutions Will Not Do,'" 21.

40 "Architectural Draughtsman Required in the Office of Ronald J Voller," *Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), February 27, 1954, 12.