



White Out

Cliff edge architecture:
responding to views, light and function

Stanic Harding
Sean Godsell
Tonkin Zulaikha
Mike Mulholland
Coop Himmelblau
Roy Grounds



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Cover / Bondi Beach Apartment Building
by Stanic Harding.
Photography by Paul Gesney.

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Australian Academy of Science Building / Canberra 1959
Architect / Roy Grounds

The Martian Embassy then & now

Roy Grounds' Academy of Science Building in Canberra remains his masterwork – and an enduring expression of 50's contemporary architecture

Compiled by Gerard Reinmuth

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New photography by Angela Moser

● **Roy Grounds' first large building**, the Academy of Science in Canberra, 1959, extended a series of investigations in geometric determinism that had dominated his residential work of that decade. As noted by Neil Clerehan, the circle, square and triangle had all formed part of Grounds' vocabulary in this period, and in fact, houses designed in 1950, 1952 and 1954 each took one of these forms.

While these domestic works all provided opportunities for Grounds' investigations, both the scale and context of the Academy of Science brought a new series of opportunities and constraints that enabled his polemic to move even further to the extreme in an effort to keep up with international developments. Philip Goad cites work by both Saarinen and Frank Lloyd Wright as influential, and the public scale of the Academy of Science project gave Grounds the structural and programmatic opportunities to respond on an equal level to these overseas works.

Perhaps the primary lesson that emerges from a review of Grounds' building is the value in architects extending their investigations into the public realm, allowing a level of exploration and elaboration not possible in domestic work. In a culture of architecture where many of our finest architects refuse to seriously engage in the political, economic and time pressures required to procure public and institutional buildings, the Academy of Science acutely demonstrates the value of this endeavour. ○

Peter Corrigan

Director, Edmond and Corrigan Pty Ltd

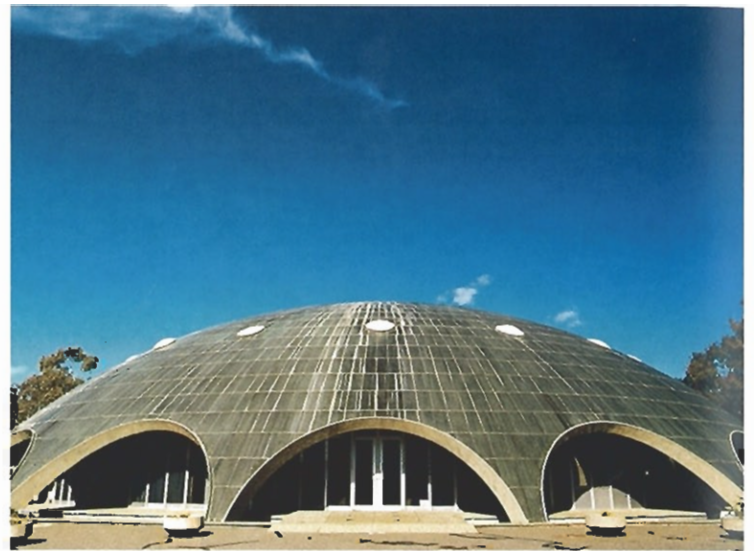
As a youth I once sat on a plane next to Roy Grounds; we were both flying to Canberra to attend the funeral of the brilliant, romantic and chain-smoking engineer Norman Mussen. At the time I was employed by Mockeridge Stahie and Mitchell, and they had graciously given me the day off.

Over the years I have considered this Oedipal encounter, which went something like this:

"I think you're a great architect. Why don't you do more work?" I asked. To which the architect patiently responded that he had never been busier; and I should watch my enthusiasms. He talked about how architecture involved various 'stakeholders' and took time, and to this day I am struck by his courteous behaviour to a young nuisance.

Once I organised a student weekend conference at a mountain guest house. Grounds spoke in the morning and arrived well before time. He explained to me that he wasn't clever, but he was punctual, and that caught people's attention. Harry Seidler spoke in the afternoon and asked whether the audience had been wallpapered for his benefit.

The sheer wealth of Melbourne in the 50s and 60s threw up a distinctive smug regional 'school', not much of which I liked. In the light of the 'McDonalds' Tower built at Ormond College, I could never understand how Grounds went into partnership with Romberg and Boyd. Throughout this era Grounds, with his painted bagged bricks, his Country Road colour schemes, and limed timber finishes, did elegance, restraint and simple good taste, with a particular authority. It was a far more Australian vision than today's retro-modernists or retail stylists. Once I visited his Toorak home and was struck by the empty living room



“Literally a building in the round, its form was scaleless. Its dome and moat seemed metaphysically appropriate to Canberra, evoking its rolling hills and slow winding valleys.”

walls. Grounds' work had a brittle and acerbic quality to it, but at its best there was a compelling creative doubt, which made you believe in his fiction. The National Academy of Science was his masterwork.

Neil Clerehan
Director, Clerehan and Cran
Architects and Planners

The Academy Building generated so much public interest that *The Age* sent me to Canberra in 1959 to write about it: imagine that happening now. Back then we were all hard-line Contemporary (waiting to be re-titled Modernist) and experiencing difficulties with our hero's fascination with plane geometry. Since his return to practice, Roy Grounds had completed the Henty House Mark II, his own house in 1951, the Douglas Wilkie House and then the triangular Leyser House perching uncomfortably on its square block in Kew. At least there was some logic there: after all, it had been designed for a triangular site in Toorak. But the Dome was a problem. Sure, it fitted admirably into the traffic

roundabout and it worked (the stroboscopic problem around the dais was solved after the opening by painting out the offending hardwood fillets). Functionally, it appeared that it had avoided the problems of Saarinen's Kresge Auditorium MIT. But the question remained: was it Contemporary?

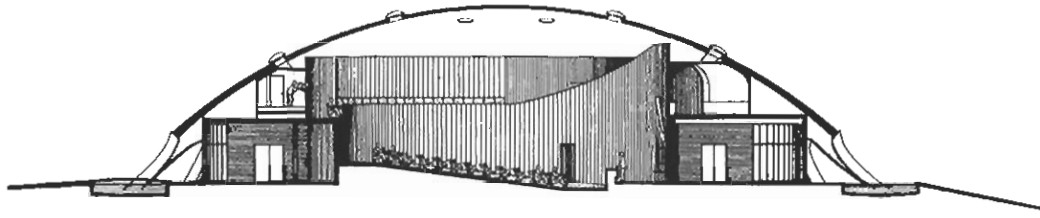
Two years later the shapes came together. In the summer of 1961 the design of the Cultural Centre was unveiled at the National Gallery and there they all were. The Square Doughnut, the Circle and the Triangle had been collected to form the greatest personal architectural statement of the century to be conceived, let alone built. The Modernists were left dumbstruck, staring at their cedar tee-squares.

Dr. Philip Goad
Senior Lecturer,
Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning, University of Melbourne
 Roy Grounds' design for the Australian Academy of Science at first glance appears puzzling when one considers his other works before 1945, mostly calm livable houses that

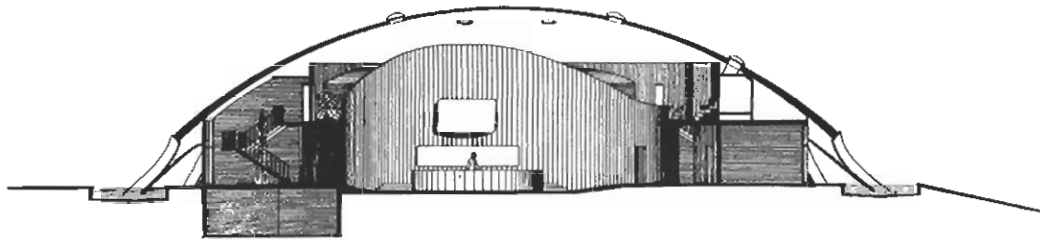
borrow their apparently artless grace from the houses of San Francisco architect William Wurster. But, Grounds in his postwar 'geometric' phase is more than prepared to mix and match style, form, materials and structure – he was a great hybridiser. The Academy of Science is the amalgamation of two famous and immediately adjacent contemporary university buildings at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Boston: Eero Saarinen's Kresge Chapel and Kresge Auditorium (1953-55). The chapel is a romantic moated clinker brick building with arches of differing diameter and an interior containing a decorative folded metal altar screen – it's an ornamental jewel of a building. The auditorium by contrast is a concrete shell structure, a dome held on three points with a copper roof and curtain wall glazing filling in the gaps between the structure and paving level. In Canberra, it is as if Grounds had scooped the two buildings together and moulded them into one. One could also make comparisons with Frank Lloyd Wright's Greek Orthodox Church, Wauwatosa (1956) which is like the Academy of Science

held aloft on a concrete pedestal. This assessment is not to denigrate Grounds' mollusc-like design, but to indicate his rich and eclectic and contemporary field of reference when designing what might appear to some to be a thoughtless spaceship for the Jetsons dropped into Canberra's sober green basin.

Tone Wheeler
Environa Design, Sydney
 My memories as a student in Canberra in the early seventies are of a modest flat city. Civic, the supposed heart of the city, had little architecture to command it, aside from the Melbourne and Sydney gateway buildings. On the other hand, the adjacent ANU campus. Twice the area of Civic, had many fine buildings including the Academy of Science. Despite some fine individual buildings such as Syd Ancher's horizontally terraced Union, it is striking how many good buildings of that era were unassuming, and courtyard based: University House (Brian Lewis, 1952), Burgmann College (Dirk Bolt, 1971), the H.C. Coombs building (Mockeridge Staible

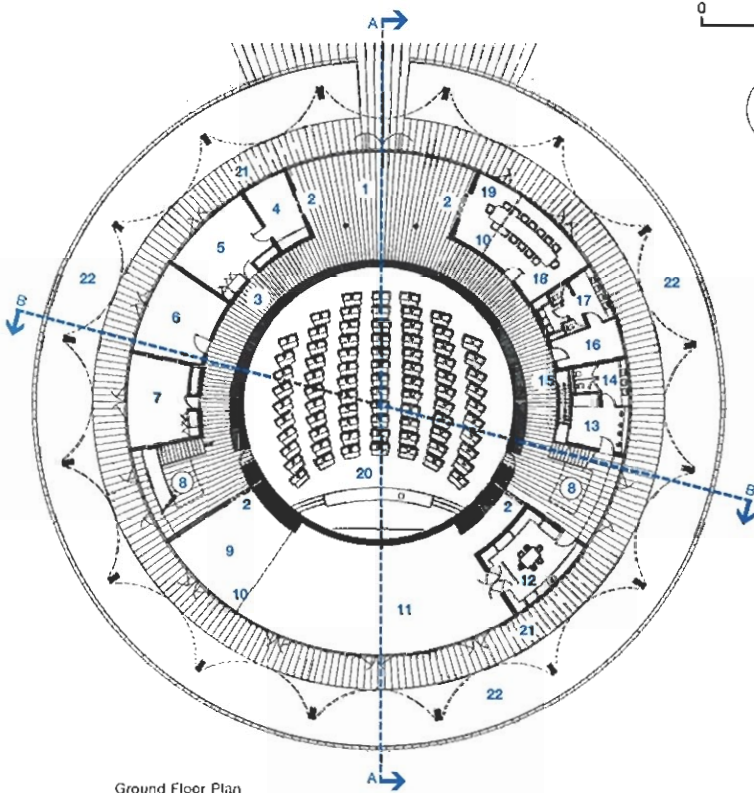


Section AA

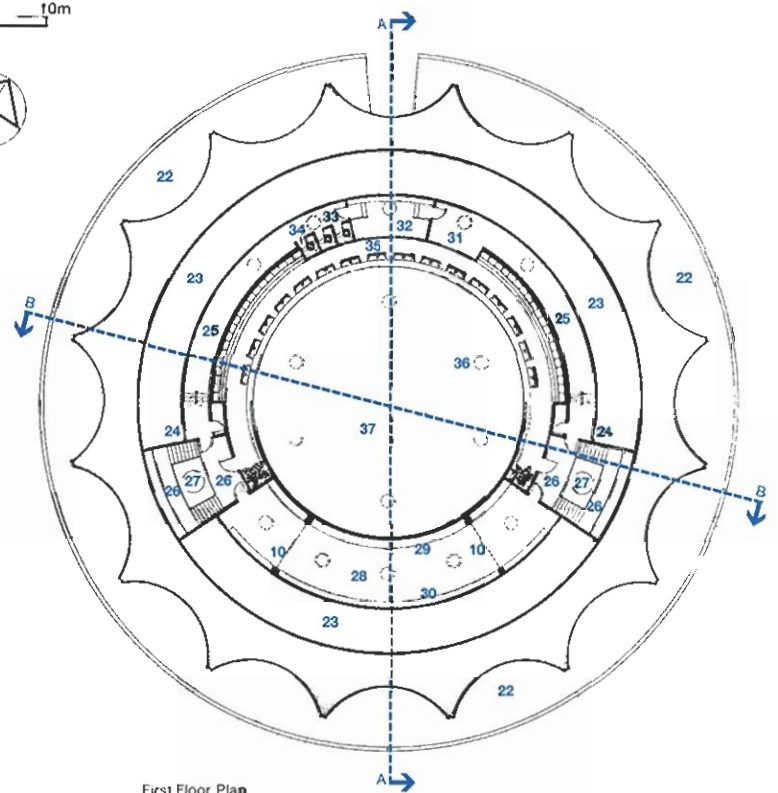


Section BB

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|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|---|
| 1 Entrance Foyer | 13 Female Cloaks | 25 Access gallery |
| 2 Sliding Doors | 14 Female Washroom and WC | 26 Landing |
| 3 Corridor | 15 Stair to Basement | 27 Fountain below |
| 4 Reception | 16 Male Cloaks | 28 Reading Room and Exhibition Gallery |
| 5 Assistant Secretary | 17 Male Washroom and WC | 29 Low bookshelves |
| 6 General Office | 18 Council Room | 30 Low bookshelves with display space above |
| 7 Officers Room | 19 President | 31 Press/Radio/Television |
| 8 Fountain and Pool | 20 Conference Chamber for 156 people | 32 Projection room |
| 9 Committee | 21 Cloister | 33 Translators |
| 10 Folding Wall | 22 Pool | 34 Sound Control |
| 11 Fellows Room | 23 Duct Space | 35 Seating Gallery for 72 people |
| 12 Kitchen | 24 Access to Duct Space | 36 Dome Lights over |
| | | 37 Upper part of Conference Chamber |



Ground Floor Plan



First Floor Plan



“Grounds’ work had a brittle and acerbic quality to it, but at its best there was a compelling creative doubt, which made you believe in his fiction.”

and Mitchell, 1964) as well as the nearby Canberra High School, which Daryl Jackson would emphasise in its refurbishment as the School of Art in 1980. Lower than the landscape, oriented to the sun, they seemed physically quite appropriate to Canberra and its climate. On any site the Academy of Science would be startling: among these quiet and self-effacing forms it was oppositional and radical in the extreme. Literally a building in the round, its form was scaleless. Its dome and moat seemed metaphysically appropriate to Canberra, evoking its rolling hills and

slow winding valleys. No wonder that it was the symbol of Canberra for more than 20 years. Each year there were probably more students who tried to clamber over it than attended lectures in the surprisingly small Becker Hall, seating barely 150 people. I recall a lecture in late 1976 by Peter Muller revealing the three-dimensional secrets in Griffin’s plan that suggested that Canberra should have a more pronounced vertical emphasis. By the early eighties when I had returned to Canberra this had occurred, but not as Griffin or Muller had intended. First the European styled Black Mountain

Tower and then the US inspired flag tower on new Parliament House supplanted the Academy of Science as the symbol of Canberra. Just before leaving Canberra I recall sitting in the huge lounge chairs at the Academy of Science listening to a debate on Canberra’s future and the

Parliament House in particular. The irony was not lost on many that the building we were in seemed a better evocation of Griffin’s intentions and Canberra’s landscape than the sunken bunker then being built on Capital Hill.

Marcel Meijer
Doctorate Student, Faculty of Science, Australian National University, Canberra

I first came across Becker House when I arrived in Canberra in 1994. I was quite puzzled by this building that resembled a dark-grey, oversized golf ball. More puzzling still was the toilet bowl on top of the building. Later I found out that it was a prank of ANU students who managed to get the bowl on top of Becker House during Bushweek and nobody had been able, as yet, to take the toilet down again. It wasn’t until much later that I discovered the actual function of this building. Becker House is home to the Australian Academy of Science. Its array of functions includes Honorary Doctorate presentations, annual meetings of diverse scientific

groups and conferences and a focus for visits from key figures in the world of science. As a graduate student of the Cooperative Research Centre for Plant Science it was therefore only a matter of time before I would enter this building.

The outside of the building resembles a half-submerged golf ball circumscribed by a small moat. Inside, the ring of circulation space is quite beautiful but somewhat confusing. As the two entrances to the lecture theatre are equidistant from the main entrance to the building you must go quite a distance around this circulation belt to enter. The lecture theatre itself is quite amazing. The chairs are comfortable with armrests and a functional little desk in front of you to take notes – very different from the normal, cold atmosphere of lecture theatres. The stage itself has all the facilities of a modern theatre and is subsequently a very comfortable, relaxed building in which to give or attend seminars.

Gerard Reinmuth is a regular contributor to AR, and currently on sabbatical working for Richard Murphy in Edinburgh.

