

# Art Casualty of Built History

## Curator Essay by Emily Collins

Museum Consultant and Curator with the Women's and Children's Health Network

Following on from *Forgotten Murals of the Adelaide Children's Hospital* (2018), the exhibition *Forgotten Murals II: Art Casualty of Built History* sketches the life story of another significant large-scale artwork to emerge from the Women's and Children's Hospital archives.

The work was a Modernist concrete mural relief with raised abstract motifs designed by Reginald Goodman Steele (1911–84), an architect for Woods, Bagot, Laybourne-Smith and Irwin (now the global firm Woods Bagot). Bold in both design and scale, the sculpture inhabited the upper southern façade of the General Purposes Building (GPB) constructed c1962–4 at the old Children's Hospital in North Adelaide. A mid-century example of Arts in Health, this playful artwork was designed to bring happiness to young patients. It also brightened the days of those who laboured to maintain the built environment to support their healing.

There are few known photographs of this artwork. It was difficult to capture in entirety. Its host structure, the low-rise GPB, dwelled in a shadow between the towering chimney of the Hospital's Boiler House and the 11-storey Outpatients (Clarence Rieger) Building, which it was built to serve. Woods Bagot had been commissioned to design all three structures as part of the same major project. The GPB was charged with housing the Hospital's electrical transformers, emergency generator, liquid oxygen plant and maintenance workshops.

Reginald Steele, creator of the curious mural, was articled to Woods Bagot in the late 1920s while studying at the South Australian (SA) School of Mines and Industries (now the University of South Australia). As part of this training, he took classes at the SA School of Arts and Crafts with peers John Dowie (1915–2008) and Geoff Shedley (1914–81), who later dabbled in creating sculptures for their own building designs. In the 1930s Steele enjoyed a high profile as an architect about town, attending society parties with Walter Bagot and (Sir) James Irwin, designer of Carrick Hill (1937–9). Intriguingly, acclaimed artist Nora Heysen (1911–2003) painted his portrait in 1932.

The Hospital had been a Woods Bagot client since Irwin, Laybourne-Smith and Steele won a design competition in 1933 to build its original Gilbert Wing. The firm's reputation was conservative until Irwin started experimenting with Modernism after his return in 1957 from a tour of the United States. Woods Bagot's controversial design for the SA School of Art on Stanley Street (North Adelaide) was under construction at the same time as the GPB. Designed in a square-doughnut shape around a courtyard for outdoor sculpture, it featured an external grille of concrete blocks that cast geometric light patterns into the classrooms.<sup>1</sup>

The GPB's architectural plans were drawn up around 1961. Any initials on the Hospital drawings got obliterated when they were recycled for demolition purposes in 1976, but presumably they are the work of Reginald Steele. His design sketch for the mural relief itself is missing from the archives.

If Steele had not called a reporter to cover his sculpture's debut, key details might have been lost. An article in *The Advertiser* dated 5 December 1962 reveals it was comprised of 38 panels, each measuring 2.1 x 1.2 m. This made it allegedly the largest sculpture produced in South Australia to date, and therefore significant. It was cast at Mosaic Flooring Co Ltd in Laurel (Croydon) Park, a branch of Pioneer Concrete Services Ltd operating on the site now occupied by SA Precast Pty Ltd.

For a local architect to mount such an artwork at a public hospital in a small Australian city in the early 1960s was an achievement. And it did ruffle a few conservative feathers in town. Letters were written to

the newspaper editor protesting the ‘waste’ of public money (£30) on a piece of oversized concrete ‘art’. One writer (7 December) was incensed that a “collection of meaningless shapes” could be offered up to children, asserting it was “wrong to disfigure public buildings with objects which have no tradition or other desirable significance and are not even remotely pleasing to the natural eye”. North Adelaide residents were already disgruntled about the Hospital’s chimney stack belching out smoke like a factory. The addition of a 78 x 14-ft sculpture in the ‘tough language’ of industrial concrete<sup>10</sup> must have been a little jarring.

John Dowie complained in 1961 that ‘backwatermanship’ was deeply entrenched in Adelaide.<sup>2</sup> Even in early 1960s Melbourne and Sydney, the public often viewed the introduction of abstract sculptures in civic spaces as an ‘offensive intrusion’.<sup>3</sup> It was adventurous of the Adelaide Children’s Hospital Board to approve the GPB mural at all.

In the broader context of Modernist art integrated with architecture, Steele’s abstract composition was progressive and of its time. Concrete was a popular material with sculptors at the 1951 Festival of Britain on London’s South Bank, due to its strength, affordability and potential for freedom of expression. Karel Vogel (1897–1961) exhibited a relief on the Power and Production Building consisting of three figures symbolising the speed and movement of electricity, and the light and heavy industries.<sup>4</sup>

Henry Moore (1898–1986), renowned for his bronze sculptures, composed an abstract concrete screen in 1953 for the Time-Life Building in London. From the late 1950s, London County Council employed Antony Hollaway (1928–2000) and William Mitchell (1925–2020) to ‘humanise’ Brutalist civic works. They built a reputation for creating dynamic, geometric artworks in concrete and demonstrated their craft on television.

1961 saw two striking vertical bas-reliefs in Australia. Lenton Parr (1924–2003), member of the Centre Five and Moore’s former assistant, sculpted an artistic interpretation of crystal formation and X-ray diffraction for an outer wall of the Chemistry Department at The Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra. James Meldrum (1931–) jazzed up Brisbane’s Wickham Terrace Carpark (architect: James Birrell) with a rhythmic composition in textured concrete.

The year Steele premiered his Hospital artwork, Australian graphic artist Douglas Annand (1903–76) made an abstract cement mural for the Lee Wah Bank in Kuala Lumpur; and Ronald Sinclair (1926–97) produced a modular bas-relief for Dirk Bolt’s Long Beach Bathing Pavilion in Tasmania. Inspired by children building sandcastles, Sinclair’s design theme was: *homo ludens* (man at play).<sup>5</sup> In SA, the Hotel Enfield (1962–3, architect: Neville S Webb) was treated to a concrete mural by English sculptor Peter Blythe and a copper sculpture by Voitre Marek (1919–99).<sup>6</sup> The year prior, Stanislaus Ostojka-Kotkowski (AM, 1922–94) had painted a Modernist mural on the ETA Foods Pty Ltd factory in Renown Park (SA).

It is known that Steele admired the work of Australian sculptor Tom Bass (1916–2010). However, his own creation was fashioned in the style of Costantino Nivola (1911–88), a Sardinian artist famous for collaborating with architects such as the influential Le Corbusier (1887–1965) and constructing abstract mural sculptures using sandcasts. A believer in making art accessible, Nivola created many works for New York playgrounds and schools and a bas-relief for a Children’s Psychiatric Hospital in the Bronx (c1968). Certain of Steele’s motifs do show this influence. He may have first encountered Nivola’s work in the 6<sup>th</sup> Triennial at the Palazzo dell’Arte (Milan, 1936) while in Italy studying architecture. This exhibition also had entries by Le Corbusier and Finnish architect Alvar Aalto (1898–1976), who at the time was experimenting with abstract reliefs.

It is not known what possessed Steele, 30 years into his architecture career, to make a special sculptural face for a building project; much less one with an industrial brief. In 1957 Nivola had mounted a 110-ft mural in reinforced concrete on the Mutual Insurance Company building in Hartford. He followed this with a wall sculpture at McCormick Place Exposition Center (Chicago, 1959), touted as the largest-ever

such artwork. Perhaps Reginald Steele took this trend as a challenge. Perhaps he desired to put himself and his town on the Modernist Mural-in-Concrete map. Maybe he, too, wanted to make something BIG.

In 1956 a landmark exhibition of Modernist buildings was staged in Adelaide's Botanic Park in conjunction with the 6<sup>th</sup> Australian Architectural Convention. Newell Platten (AM), whom Steele taught design in the late 1940s, credits this with giving the architects involved the confidence to fully embrace Modernism. Steele was involved; Platten recalls passing a bitterly cold night dutifully minding one of the open-air pavilions with him.<sup>7</sup> Abstract murals and sculptures by Ostoja-Kotkowski, Marek and Wladyslaw Dutkiewicz (1918–99) were integrated into several of the architects' pavilions.

1961 was a significant year for Australian sculpture. Australia had its 1<sup>st</sup> national sculpture exhibition and prize (the Mildura Triennial);<sup>8</sup> and the Centre Five group of Melbourne sculptors launched a program urging architects to commission modern abstract sculpture as integrated with modern architecture.<sup>9</sup>

Again, perhaps Steele read the room and responded. And his response was certainly on point. The sculpture he fashioned for the GPB at the Children's Hospital was so well integrated with the structure, it was not bolted to a wall; it *was* a wall.

John Dowie believed that architectural sculpture should be "a microcosm of the building itself ... telling in form and meaning".<sup>2</sup> So what was Steele trying to tell?

Facing the Casualty Department carpark, his big creation captured a big Hospital audience. Thousands of sick and injured kids encountered it when they were brought in via ambulance. It was visible from all rooms at the rear of Outpatients, including the north-facing wards on floors 7 and 8 and a play room for convalescent children. Reginald Steele knew the Outpatients and site plans inside out. He pitched his mural sculpture with this child audience in mind.

Steele also composed his artwork for the occupants of the GPB. Having sketched each space, he was intimate with their intended purpose and contents: maintenance and engineering, a power plant and diesel generator. He knew his audience: engineers, painters, plumbers, electricians, fitters, carpenters ... and machines.

An architect by trade, Steele's sculptural motifs are the abstract language of a man who had drawn 100s of building plans in his life. The larger geometric shapes speak of simplified structural elevations; of square doughnut-shaped roofs in aerial view – even fragments of Le Corbusier's 1950s Notre-Dame du Haut chapel in Ronchamp (France). Other components evoke a disassembly of workshop apparatus; pieces of machinery. The mural is like a deconstructed, fantastical architectural drawing in 3-D, populated by giant toy maintenance workers with tools for heads. It is a concrete elegy to industry; a platonic love letter to fellow men in the building arts and trades.

Murals – even big, strong concrete ones – are vulnerable artworks. Philip Goad laments that due to its 'unrelenting aesthetic', Australian Late-Modern architecture (1950s–60s) tends to be "unloved, over-loved and both misunderstood", and frequently razed.<sup>10</sup> By association, the history of Modernist building artworks is littered with casualties and near-misses.

Wickham Carpark and the Long Beach Bathing Pavilion both endure – so their mural artworks remain extant. After bulldozing its host, ANU rehomed Lenton Parr's vertical frieze in 2018 and gave it an official welcome. In the United Kingdom, the University of Leeds preserved Hubert Dalwood's (1924–76) aluminium bas-relief mural (1961) when it razed Bodington Hall in 2013, and reinstalled it on the façade of Stage@Leeds. Willi Soukop's (1907–95) 'Pied Piper of Hamelin' sculpture (1959) is an interesting case. It was salvaged during renovations of Elmington Estate (Camberwell) in 2000 and re-sited an astonishing 15 years later at a primary school.

According to Goad, Modern hospitals pose specific challenges for heritage preservation, because they are ongoing building sites, constantly subjected to addition and refurbishment.<sup>10</sup> The Adelaide Children's Hospital was no exception. And as for Steele's artwork: its size was its Achilles heel.

Made redundant by the Hospital's new Saltmarsh Building, in 1976 the GPB was demolished to make way for a diagnostic and surgery wing. The mural sculpture did get a reprieve, but only partial. Instructions were marked on the building's demolition plans to salvage and reuse 11 (non-consecutive) panels of the total 38. A photo recently unearthed in a 1992 dilapidation report from Engineering and Building Services gives 'concrete' proof that the Hospital indeed honoured this request.

The artwork's second life was a much reduced, semi-subterranean existence. It was reinstalled opposite the former Hospital school and crèche site, beneath a walkway. A scene shot from inside the schoolroom in the late 1970s shows it loitering bulkily in the background, peering back in the dim through two sets of windows separated by a staircase. Newsworthy in the 1960s, it had become the concrete elephant outside the room.

In its second incarnation, the mural relief led an undisturbed existence until a major merger rocked its foundations. On 15 March 1989 the Adelaide Children's Hospital amalgamated with the Queen Victoria Hospital. To come together physically, a whole additional hospital had to be accommodated on the North Adelaide site. This placed a second target on the sculpture's back. In 1992 the wrecking ball swung again. The downfall was total. The mural became a footnote of art history: an art casualty of built history.

Modern artworks, as with Modern architecture, need a champion to advocate for their preservation in the face of environmental disruption. As Goad recognises, sometimes the best preservation that can be managed is documentation via archiving, collection of digital and oral histories and – in rare cases – through exhibition.<sup>10</sup>

*Forgotten Murals II: Art Casualty of Built History* (2021) is one of those special cases. Regrettably, due to the lack of quality documentation of the sculpture in its prime, the exhibition's dominant visual themes are absence and destruction. The focus is on the *casualty*. A champion for this artwork came too late.

## References

1. Kevin O'Sullivan, 'Dinosaur or delight? Late modern architectural heritage and the 1963 South Australian School of Art building', *Journal of the Historical Society of South Australia*, 34, 2006.
2. John Dowie, 'Sculpture and the architect', *Kalori*, March 1961.
3. Keith Broadfoot, 'Banishing the thing: abstraction and Australian sculpture', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*, 12(1), 2012.
4. *Concrete Quarterly*, 'Concrete sculpture in the Festival exhibitions', Autumn 1951.
5. Paul Johnston Architects, *Long Beach Bathing Pavilion conservation plan*, n.d.
6. Stuart Symons, *Modernist Adelaide: 100 buildings 1940s–1970s*, 2019.
7. Newell Platten (AM), Oral history interview, SLSA OH 730/3121, February 2013.
8. Anne Sanders, *The Mildura Sculpture Triennials 1961–1978: an interpretative history*, PhD thesis, The Australian National University, November 2009.
9. Jane Eckett, 'Renewed vows: Centre Five and the post-war remarriage of Melbourne sculptors and architects', Interspaces: Art + Architectural Exchanges from East to West conference, University of Melbourne, 20–22 August 2010.
10. Philip Goad, 'Unloved, over-loved or just mis-understood? Modern architecture: the problem child of heritage', *Historic Environment*, 25(1), 2013.

The Yellow Heart Gallery exhibition *Forgotten Murals II: Art Casualty of Built History* is proudly presented by the Women's & Children's Hospital Foundation in partnership with the History and Heritage Group of the Women's and Children's Health Network, South Australia.

To view the online exhibition (May–August 2021), visit: [www.wchfoundation.org.au/forgotten-murals](http://www.wchfoundation.org.au/forgotten-murals)

For more information, contact:

Lauren Simeoni, Arts Officer, Arts in Health

[artsinhealth@wchfoundation.org.au](mailto:artsinhealth@wchfoundation.org.au) | T +61 8 8464 7900

55 King William Road | North Adelaide | South Australia 5006

[www.wchfoundation.org.au](http://www.wchfoundation.org.au)

