



Forgotten Murals II: Art Casualty of Built History

Curated by Emily Collins

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Women's &
Children's Hospital
Foundation

Arts in Health



Government
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SOUTH
AUSTRALIA'S
HISTORY
FESTIVAL
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Image LEFT - Aerial view of North Adelaide with Children's Hospital (at top), D Darian Smith, c1971;
 Image RIGHT - General Purposes Building with mural relief, Adelaide Children's Hospital, 1976

Following on from *Forgotten Murals of the Adelaide Children's Hospital* (2018), the exhibition *Forgotten Murals II* 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 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 SA School of Mines and Industries (now UniSA). 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 created 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 Gilbert Wing. The firm's reputation was conservative until Irwin started experimenting with Modernism after his return in 1957 from a US tour. Woods Bagot's controversial design for the SA School of Art (North Adelaide) was under construction at the same time as the GPB. Designed in a square-doughnut shape around a sculpture courtyard, it featured an external grille of concrete blocks that cast geometric light patterns.

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 Hospital archives.

If Steele had not called a reporter to cover his sculpture's debut, key details might have been lost. An *Advertiser* article 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 industrial concrete must have been a little jarring. ... (to be continued)

To read the full Curator essay and visit the exhibition online, go to:
www.wchfoundation.org.au/forgotten-murals



Image LEFT - Salvaged mural at second site, 1992; Image RIGHT - Mural being demolished, 1992

This exhibition was planned and exhibited on the lands of the Kurna People. We pay our respects to the Kurna Elders past and present, and to the Elders of the lands this brochure reaches.

The Curator wishes to thank: Jill Newman & Lauren Simeoni (WCH Foundation); Alex Del Gaudio & Marg Lea (WCHN History & Heritage Group); WCHN staff: Jim Mountzouris & Sam Martin (Engineering & Building Services), Tim Boord (Corporate Communications); State Library SA; National Library Australia; History Trust SA, Julie Collins (UniSA Architecture Museum); Stuart Symons (Modernist Adelaide); Cary Duffield (Troppo Architects), Ben Campbell, Josh Harris (ArchitectureAu), Paul Johnston (Paul Johnston Architects), Tonique Bolt, Richard Stringer, Museo Nivola & the Nivola family, Tori Dixon-Whittle & Allan Campbell (Hans Heysen Foundation), Helen Elder (Elder Fine Arts). A special thank you to William (Bill) Steele.

History and Heritage Collection

The Women's and Children's Health Network has a collection of historical artefacts which is managed by the WCHN History and Heritage Group. This was originally formed as the ICONS Group in 1995 by retired Adelaide Children's Hospital Staff. The Group aims to preserve, collect, collate, catalogue, store, display and interpret items of historical significance to the Women's and Children's Hospital and its predecessors the Adelaide Children's Hospital, the Queen Victoria Hospital and associated institutions.

Women's & Children's Hospital Foundation Arts in Health program

The WCH Foundation Arts in Health program coordinates five galleries in the Hospital, providing a space away from the stresses of treatment to distract, entertain and inspire, improving the visual environment. The Arts in Health programs integrate art into the life of the Hospital to improve people's health and wellbeing. We try to make the environment more 'child-friendly', making it look better and helping to make the time spent in hospital 'feel better'. The Yellow Heart Gallery provides a platform to share the WCHN History and Heritage Collection with the Hospital community and explore the significant people and events that shaped the Hospital today.

Art Casualty of Built History is on display in the Yellow Heart Gallery (Level 1, Zone F) at the Women's and Children's Hospital from May until the end of August 2021.

Cover Image: View of abstract mural at Adelaide Children's Hospital, 4 December 1962, Photographer Sam Cheshire, Source: Newspix.



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