

BATES SMART: 150 Years of Australian Architecture

Philip Goad, Thames & Hudson, 2004

Review by Stuart Harrison

This well written, well designed and essential book records in detail the history of Melbourne-based practice Bates Smart, from its founding in 1852 by immigrant Architect Joseph Reed (later to become Reed & Barnes; then Reed, Henderson & Smart and so forth until Bates Smart & McCutcheon in 1926) to the large corporate practice it is today, based in Melbourne and with a smaller office in Sydney.

Through Bates Smart's various incarnations and collaborations it has produced many of Melbourne's major projects and the book proposes that the history of Melbourne - or even Australian - architecture is inseparable from this practice. This sense was also clear from the lavish book launch at the Bates Smart-designed Crown Promenade hotel where large hanging vertical banners declared 'We designed this city' and depicted the key Melbourne buildings Bates Smart has seen through: from Victoria's State Library (Joseph Reed, 1854-70) to Federation Square (Lab Architecture Studio & Bates Smart, 1997-2002). In between are a host of significant major projects including office buildings, Melbourne University, Cathedrals (Bendigo and St Paul's) and numerous schools and hospitals.

The book details the developments of the practice. Author Philip Goad draws upon Melbourne University colleagues Miles Lewis, Julie Willis and George Tibbits to catalogue the earlier periods of the practice, and there is extensive use of quality photographs and exquisite reproduction of drawings from this period.

Bates Smart is an establishment practice with long-standing connections to the upper echelons of Melbourne society, and it is suggested that these go back to Reed who developed an ability to move in the right circles (particularly those of Redmond Barry, driving force behind the founding of the University of Melbourne, the Supreme Court Library, the Public Library, the National Gallery and the Museum) and developed the office's corporate style culture of collaboration.

Goad points out that this book is not like a conventional architectural monograph. It is a survey of a practice with many joint-authors, many partners from overseas. In one respect Bates Smart reflects another history of architectural tastes as outside collaborators had their Australian projects realised by the firm, such as William Butterfield, SOM, IM Pei, Kurokawa, Glenn Murcutt, LAB. It was, however, Osborn McCutcheon's desire for efficiency and modernity - fuelled by service in the army during the Second World War - that provided the impetus for BSM's (it changed to just Bates Smart in 1997) post-war period of innovation, that is now the source of their architectural style and imagery for this book.

It is only at the end of the book that it departs from a history text and hovers on the edge of office brochure - through the use of photorealistic images of projects in the pipeline. Given the enormous quantity of work the firm has completed and its huge archives, it seems unnecessary to depict projects before their completion, given the volatile nature of architectural practice (and the potential for these projects to be unrealised), which Bates Smart has managed to survive for so long.