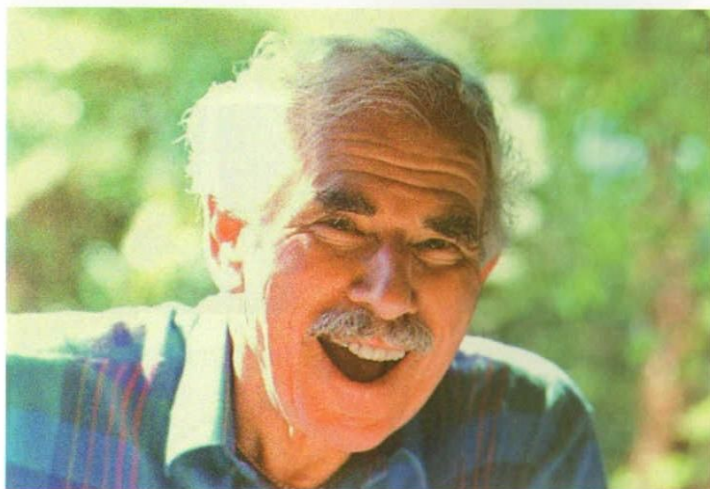


VALE: ANATOL KAGAN

(1913-2009)

Simon Reeves



A significant link with early modernist architecture in Melbourne has been severed with the recent death of architect Anatol Kagan at the age of 95 years. Born in St Petersburg in Russia, Kagan was the son of Dr Abram Saulovich Kagan, a university economics lecturer who later became a renowned publisher in the United States. When the family were exiled to Germany by the new Communist regime in 1923, the young Anatol became interested in architecture and, later, hoped to study at the Bauhaus under Walter Gropius – only to see it closed down by the National Socialists in 1933. Instead, he obtained his Diploma of Architecture from the prestigious Berlin Technical University. Although thus qualified, as a foreigner he was unable to practice in Germany and survived instead by giving English lessons to people who wished to migrate to Australia – a decision that inspired him to follow suit in June 1938. He travelled via London, where he was briefly employed in the office of an émigré Swiss architect, before arriving in Melbourne in January 1939.

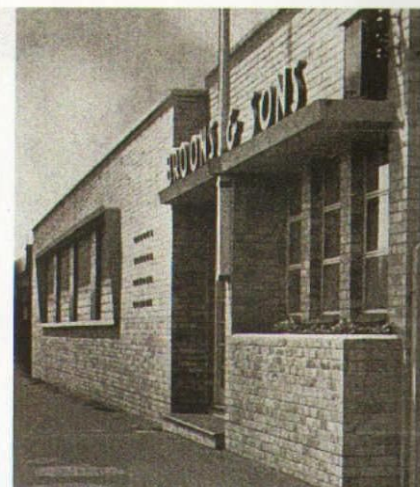
Anatol Kagan's first architectural job in his new country was in the office of Hugh & Arthur Peck, followed by brief stints with top-shelf modernists Seabrook & Fildes, fellow Jewish émigré Joseph Plottel, and the Geelong-based firm of Buchan, Laid & Buchan. In 1941, he applied for the position of in-house architect to Australian Consolidated Industries, in which capacity he designed a number of buildings at their Spotswood factory. Encouraged by a fellow Russian émigré named Yuri Blumin, Kagan commenced his own practice in 1942. In gratitude for his friend's support and professional contacts, the practice was initially known as Blumin & Kagan. Their most celebrated project was a striking Moderne-style box factory in Brunswick, which was published in a trade journal in 1942. Wartime restrictions evidently put an end to the practice of Blumin & Kagan, but the latter partner soon found himself employment in the thriving Department of Works & Housing, working on the layout of military camps. During this period, he also found time to enter a design competition sponsored by The Sun newspaper, which hoped to find the ideal post-war house. Kagan's entry (in conjunction with another young architect) was unplaced, but published. He went on to explore the theme further when, while employed in the department, he assisted architect Arthur Baldwinson in 1945 on the development of the Beaufort House – a prefabricated steel dwelling that had been proposed as a bold solution to the post-war housing shortage.

Kagan remained with the Department of Works & Housing until 1949, when he decided to resume his private practice in association with a former government colleague, developer/builder Albert Young. By the following year, the office had been re-badged as Anatol Kagan & Associates, with Kagan's pre-war champion, the theatrical Yuri Blumin, and the latter's architect

DESIGNERS:
BLUMIN & KAGAN

MODERN
FACTORY

Street facade of more
than usual interest



friend, Bill Millar, as the associates. The practice thrived during the 1950s, specialising in large modern houses for wealthy and typically Jewish émigré businessmen. In 1954, Kagan designed the Mount Scopus Memorial College at Burwood, Australia's first modern purpose-built Jewish school, which attracted considerable publicity in the professional and mainstream press, but which, unfortunately, was often attributed solely to Dr Ernest Fooks, who had been brought into the project as Kagan's silent associate. In 1957, Kagan entered the competition for the new Sydney Opera House. Only a few years later, he closed his Melbourne practice to move to Sydney himself, where, in a bold change of direction, he took a position with the Public Works Department and specialised in the design of mental hospitals – a field that he saw as a unique and rewarding architectural challenge. He remained there until the division closed in 1973.

Space does not permit anything more than the briefest mention of Kagan's extraordinary life outside the architectural sphere. A follower of Trotsky from the age of seventeen, Kagan became an important and influential figure in the history of left-wing politics in Australia. He recruited his own Trotskyist group in Melbourne in the 1950s, became a life member of the ALP, and, at his funeral in Sydney in July, his family received personal messages of condolence from Kevin Rudd, Bob Hawke and Paul Keating. In retirement, Kagan also carried out translation work for his father's US-based publishing house, translating a number of Russian books into English such as *Soviet Generals Recall World War II* (1981) and *In One Newspaper: A Chronicle of Unforgettable Years* (1985). Kagan was also an active member of the Theosophical Society in Sydney, and, from the 1970s to the 1990s, contributed articles to both the local journal, *Theosophy in Australia*, and its international counterpart, *Theosophy*.

Anatol Kagan, known to his family as 'Dadda', passed away in Sydney on 2 July 2009, survived by Dawn, his wife of over fifty years, his son Peter, and his daughters Natalie, Stefanie and Catherine. The present writer, who interviewed Kagan about his architectural career in January 2008, feels privileged and grateful for even such a fleeting interaction with an unsung hero of modern architecture – this extraordinary and respected figure in Australia's post-war history who, on so many different levels and in so many different spheres, improved the cultural landscape of the nation.

Special thanks to Anatol Kagan's wife, Dawn, and son-in-law, Michael Atherton, for providing additional information for inclusion in this obituary, as well as the recent photograph. The writer is presently working on a more detailed overview of Anatol Kagan's architectural career, to be published in a future edition.