

‘This experiment in international living’ International House Melbourne and its collection

Caitlin Stone

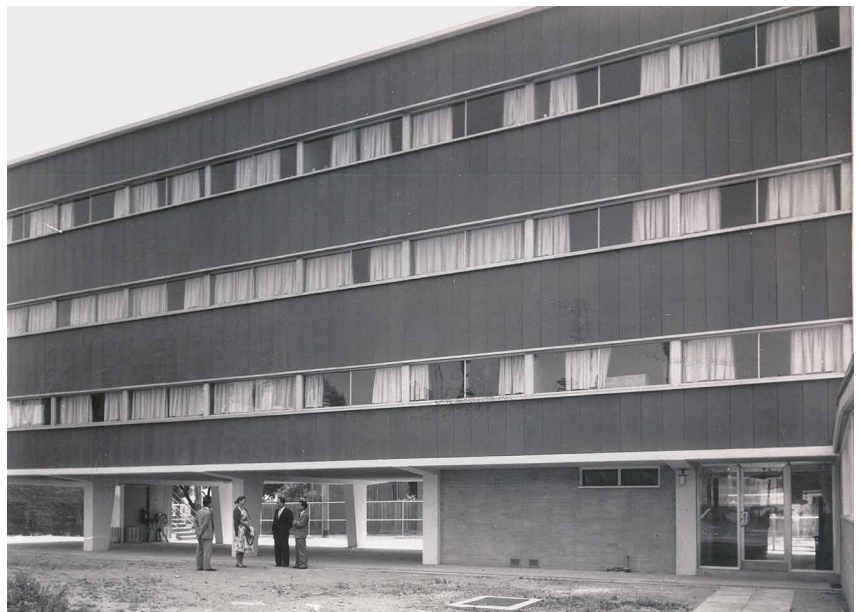
International House at the University of Melbourne this year celebrates its 60th anniversary. It was in 1957 that the first students—42 men from 11 countries (including Australia)—moved into their new accommodation at Australia’s first international hall of residence (see below).¹ Located at 241 Royal Parade in Parkville, International House is the second-largest residence associated with the University of Melbourne. In 2017, it has been home to around 350 undergraduate and postgraduate students from 39 countries. This year also saw the International House Collection—comprising archives, artworks, building fragments, furniture, decorative arts, trophies and other objects—recognised as an official cultural collection of the University of Melbourne. This article briefly tells the story of the beginnings of International House Melbourne, before describing some elements of the International House Collection.²

The beginnings of International House

The International House project was born from the efforts of students, academics and the community more broadly to ease the housing problems faced in particular by international students. A series of newspaper reports in the mid- to late 1940s

noted the University of Melbourne’s housing problem.³ The student newspaper *Farrago* also reported on the ‘acute housing shortage’ facing students.⁴ In 1949, the University of Melbourne hosted a ‘Student Needs Conference’ where it was estimated that more than 1,000 students were experiencing substandard housing conditions.⁵ This was brought about in part by ex-servicemen and women returning to study, but also by an increase in students from overseas. It was these international students who faced particular problems in finding housing. ‘People of Melbourne know

the housing problem is acute’, wrote Colombo Plan student Bhupendra Jain. ‘In some cases [international] students change their lodgings again and again because they can’t get used to the frowns of the landladies, or the food, or because they don’t like the place.’⁶ University officials were aware of the problem. Speaking in 1950, vice-chancellor Sir John Medley told a meeting of the English Speaking Union that, if overseas students returned home ‘disgruntled’ as a result of poor accommodation, ‘Australia would lose what could have been good ambassadors for the country abroad’.⁷



Previous page: The Clunies Ross Wing at International House, 1957. Photograph by Australian News and Information Bureau. International House Archives, University of Melbourne.

Right: Prime Minister Robert Menzies speaking at the official opening of International House Melbourne, 24 May 1958. Album of student activities 1960, compiled and presented to the House by Soedjadi Sastrosogito and Richard Shiell. International House Archives, University of Melbourne.



In 1950, Samuel (Sam) Dimmick, secretary of the University of Melbourne Students' Representative Council, and fellow students Abinasti Jerath (an architecture student from India) and Rajaratnam Sundarason (a medical student from Singapore) began lobbying in earnest for improved accommodation for international students. As a newly arrived student in early 1950, Sundarason had experienced racial discrimination in his attempts to find housing in Melbourne. Speaking in 2007, he recalled the problems he and other international students had encountered, often staying in low-standard temporary accommodation and repeatedly having to move house: 'We were frequent visitors to the student housing officer, as we had difficulty obtaining suitable lodgings. We felt we were being discriminated against because of our colour'.⁸ He went on to say:

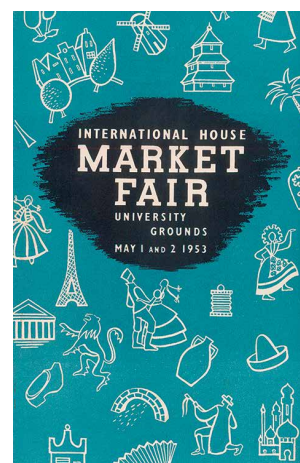
There was, therefore, a compelling need for a new residential college, and its goals in addition to pursuing academic excellence were to advocate and stress the development of interpersonal relationships among people from various cultures. Hence, the idea of establishing the International House associated with the University of Melbourne was born.⁹

An International House Committee was established and met for the first time in June 1950.¹⁰ The committee decided that the proposed International House would 'differ from both a University College and a hostel'. Instead, International House would be a hall of residence with 'good accommodation' although 'lacking some of the amenities of a college'.¹¹ To ensure 'minimum running cost', meals would be served 'cafeteria style' and students would 'assist with certain tasks in the house'.¹² Significantly, it was agreed that at least 50 per cent of residents would be international students. The proposal was strongly supported by the University Council, which was 'mindful that the cause of international co-operation and goodwill could be furthered by the proper reception and accommodation of an ever-increasing number of students from Asia and elsewhere'.¹³

The idea for an International House quickly gained support. Within the university, chancellor Arthur Dean, vice-chancellors John Medley and George Paton, historian Norman Harper, microbiologist Mavis Jackson, lecturer in French and education Olive Wykes and many others strongly supported the project. Academics' wives and other women worked to raise money

through various auxiliary groups. The efforts of these women were fundamental to the success of the International House project. It also had strong support from government. Richard Casey, Australia's minister for external affairs, helped to secure £50,000 from the Federal Government.¹⁴ The governments of Singapore and Malaysia also provided funds. Community groups, in particular the Rotary Club, were major fundraisers. Lists of donors to the International House Appeal show just how broad community support was. Groups and businesses including Australian Paper Manufacturers Ltd, the Country Women's Association, Carlton and United Breweries, the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), the Paris Handbag Shop and hundreds of others all made contributions.¹⁵ As the new accommodation was to house rural as well as international students, many country towns in Victoria also worked to raise funds. Local newspapers reported on the progress of the International House appeal and called on readers to support it: 'Here is a splendid opportunity for establishing friendly relations with these lands [of Southeast Asia] and Australian citizens should support this project', urged the *Camperdown Chronicle*.¹⁶

Cover of the program for the 1953 Market Fair, held to raise funds for International House. International House Archives, University of Melbourne.



Many supporters were motivated by the twin aims of improving housing and creating better relations between Australians and international visitors. Writing in *The Age* in 1952, University of Melbourne vice-chancellor John Medley expressed the views of many supporters when he wrote of the importance of earning ‘the good will of our Asiatic neighbours’:

Living together on the kind of easy and informal terms, the physical prerequisites of which only a collegiate institution can provide, will do more to iron out the difficulties inherent in diverse backgrounds and diverse social outlooks than all the reading and lecturing in the world.¹⁷

Prime Minister Robert Menzies, speaking at the official opening of International House on 24 May 1958, touched on the same ideas:

[T]hat’s why the conception of this International House is one of the splendid conceptions in University history. I have nothing but praise for it myself, because it recognises that if you bring together into one place people of intelligence, students, coming from different backgrounds, coming from old and different cultures and absorbing

something of a new one, then you are bound to increase the area of human understanding and the possibilities, the probabilities, of genuine friendship between the peoples of the world.¹⁸

By 1957, the first building (named after International House’s first chairman, scientist Sir Ian Clunies Ross) had been completed (pictured on page 33) and residents began to arrive. Many of those involved in the planning had hoped to admit women from the beginning, but this did not happen until 1972. Among the 1957 cohort were students from Malaysia, Singapore, India, Cyprus, Indonesia, Thailand, North Borneo, the Philippines, Malta and the USA. The first year saw the establishment of the International House Council and the International House Students’ Club. The crest and motto (*fraternitas* or ‘brotherhood’) were adopted. Students organised discussion groups, a dance, sporting teams and a performance of Euripides’ *The Bacchae*. In the first issue of the student magazine *Satadal*, the warden (head of college) of International House, Brian Jones, reflected on what he called ‘this experiment in international living’.¹⁹ Jones was optimistic that students would approach the experiment:

in a spirit of critical intelligence and freedom from prejudice; and that in pursuing the purposes and principles for which a University stands—truth, tolerance, freedom—these students, assembled from all over the world, would find companionship and understanding as well.²⁰

The International House Collection

The International House Collection was this year recognised as one of the University of Melbourne’s cultural collections. The collection comprises archival material (the largest component), artworks, building fragments, furniture, decorative arts and other objects. Some of the earliest material relates to the fundraising efforts that pre-dated the opening of International House. Crucial to these efforts were several women’s auxiliaries, of which the largest, the ‘Refreshment Group’, comprised parents of students and wives of academics keen to support the International House project. One of its first fundraising endeavours was to provide snacks for the student carnival of 1952. The following year, the group opened a ‘coffee counter’ in the foyer of the Union Theatre and ran a regular



Brian Jones, the first warden, with student Paul Foo Yoon Sen in one of the first 'study-bedrooms' at International House, 1957. Photograph by Australian News and Information Bureau. International House Archives, University of Melbourne.

cake and jam stall on campus. The women went on to establish a busy catering service, providing food and drink for groups including the National Gallery Society, the Royal Aeronautical Society, the British Medical Association, the Victorian Symphony Orchestra, the Goethe Society and the Inter-Planetary Society.²¹ One of the group's biggest projects was to cater for the International House Market Fair held at the university in May 1953 (see page 35). As well as preparing and providing refreshments, members of the group made sewing bags, table decorations, seagrass baskets and even men's underpants to sell. They also cooked and sold 'international foods' including 'a Danish soup', 'Greek stuffed peppers' and 'Indian relish'. Like many voluntary organisations, the Refreshment Group struggled to retain members, but the strong commitment of a core group of women kept it going. When the group disbanded in 1971, University of Melbourne chancellor Sir Robert Menzies wrote to its president, Winifred Gardner:

In the history of International House the activities and generosity of your group have become a living legend of service.

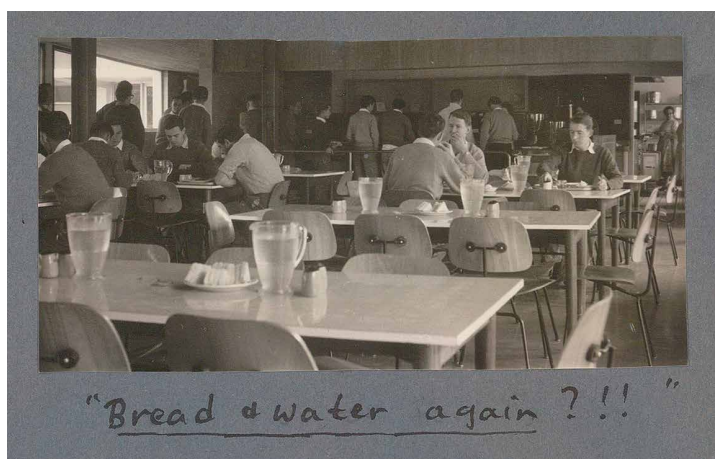
The considerable sums of money contributed to the construction and equipment of the House are indeed important in what has been achieved, but of even greater importance has been the example of rare devotion to international ideals, which enabled our House to be the first of its kind in the Commonwealth.²²

The archival collection also includes minutes and papers of the International House Council, from its first meeting in 1955. Early meetings were preoccupied with the practicalities of staffing, buying furniture, appointing the first warden and recruiting students. Many of these preoccupations remained after the arrival of the first residents, but the presence of students brought new topics of discussion. A food committee was set up to arrange for more 'overseas dishes' for residents.²³ A set of rules for behaviour was established. This required (among other conditions of residence) that 'Lady Visitors' not be entertained after 11.30 pm, and that residents avoid wearing slippers and pyjamas in public rooms.²⁴ At the end of the second year, warden Brian Jones reported that, although academically there was room for improvement, in other ways International House was working well:

To turn now to the important question [of] how well students from Australia and other countries are mixing and getting on with each other—the answer, I believe is that the House is proving an undoubted success.²⁵

The archives are just one element of the International House Collection. Around 2,000 photographs provide a visual history of life at Australia's first international house. Several were taken by photographers from the Australian News and Information Bureau (ANIB), a Federal Government agency set up to promote 'the Australian lifestyle' overseas.²⁶ These are mostly staged shots intended to show off the facilities of International House to potential residents and donors. One image, for example, shows a group of students from Australia, Thailand and the Philippines reading newspapers and playing chess in the common room. The image effectively represents the aims of the founders of International House in showing local and international students socialising in a homelike environment. Another shows the warden chatting to Colombo Plan student Paul Foo Yoon Sen in one of the new 'study-bedrooms' (see above). Other photographs in the collection were

Students in the dining hall at International House, 1960. Album of student activities, compiled and presented to the House by Soedjadi Sastrosogito and Richard Shiell. International House Archives, University of Melbourne.



taken by students and show a much more informal way of life. An album compiled by residents Soedjadi Sastrosogito and Richard Shiell in 1960 chronicles life at International House in some 90 images, showing students eating in the dining hall (see above), reading the newspapers on a Sunday morning, playing footy in the rain, drinking and studying.

The International House Collection is partly a record of the establishment and early history of the first residence of its type in Australia. But it can also contribute to our understanding of the lives of international students in Australia, the changing nature of university life, and relations between Australia and our near neighbours. It is hoped that the recognition of the collection as a cultural collection of the University of Melbourne, as well as the publication of a new history of International House by Professor Emeritus Frank Larkins (scheduled for early 2018), will help to increase awareness of the collection among both former residents and researchers.

Dr Caitlin Stone is the librarian and archivist at International House, University of Melbourne. She has previously worked at the Baillieu Library, the eScholarship Research Centre and University of Melbourne Archives. She has a PhD in classics and a Master of Arts in public history.

Access to the **International House Collection** is by appointment. Researchers and others with an interest can contact Dr Caitlin Stone, on ih-library@unimelb.edu.au.

- 1 L.R. Humphreys, *Of many nations: A history of International House, the University of Melbourne*, Melbourne: International House, 2004, p. 12. Similar residences followed in Brisbane (1965), Sydney (1967), Wollongong (1980) and Darwin (1985). All are part of International Houses Worldwide, of which International House New York was the first to be purpose built, in 1924.
- 2 The longer story of the development of International House Melbourne has been told by Professor Emeritus Frank Larkins in a new history to be published by Melbourne University Publishing in early 2018.
- 3 See among others: 'Student housing', *Age*, 24 April 1945, p. 4; 'Where will our university students be housed next year?', *Argus*, 12 July 1945, p. 8; 'Student housing problem', *Age*, 4 September 1945, p. 2; 'Students face housing problems', *Argus*, 14 September 1945, p. 10; 'Students in need of housing', *Argus*, 10 June 1947, p. 16.
- 4 'Demand for housing', *Farrago*, 27 April 1949, p. 1.
- 5 Sam Dimmick, 'International House: The early years', *Satadal: The Magazine of International House, University of Melbourne*, no. 1, 1959, p. 25.
- 6 Bhupendra Jain, 'Asians say no place like home!', *Argus*, 19 October 1954, p. 4.
- 7 'Govt. aid weakens university system', *Age*, 17 November 1950, p. 2.
- 8 R. Sundarason, 'Speech delivered at International House's 50th anniversary dinner', *Fraternitas*, 2007, pp. 16–17, http://ihouse.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/1467036/Fraternitas_2007.pdf.
- 9 Sundarason, 'Speech delivered', p. 17.
- 10 Humphreys, *Of many nations*, p. 3.
- 11 Dimmick, 'International House', pp. 26–7.
- 12 Dimmick, 'International House', pp. 26–7.
- 13 'International House Appeal', *University of Melbourne Gazette*, vol. 8, no. 5, 15 July 1952, p. 49.
- 14 'Cheque for Asians', *Argus*, 16 November 1954, p. 11; Daniel Oakman, *Facing Asia: A history of the Colombo Plan*, Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2004, p. 184.
- 15 *University Gazette*, vol. 10, no. 3, 30 June 1954, p. 48.
- 16 'Progress of International House project', *Camperdown Chronicle*, 4 May 1954, p. 6.
- 17 J.D.G. Medley, 'Good will opportunity: The appeal for an international house', *Age*, 12 July 1952, p. 9.
- 18 Robert Menzies speaking at the opening of International House in Melbourne on 24 May 1958. MS 4936, Papers of Sir Robert Menzies, National Library of Australia.
- 19 Brian Jones, 'From the warden: Sir Ian Clunies-Ross and International House', *Satadal*, no. 1, 1959, p. 6.
- 20 Jones, 'From the warden'.
- 21 Mrs R.E. (Hilda) Banks, 'Some refreshing years: A short history of International House Refreshment Group', July 1963. International House Archives.
- 22 R.G. Menzies to Mrs W. Gardner, 22 July 1971. International House Archives.
- 23 International House Council minutes, 17 April 1957. International House Archives.
- 24 International House Council minutes, 17 September 1958. International House Archives.
- 25 Warden's report 1958, International House Council minutes, 19 November 1958. International House Archives.
- 26 National Archives of Australia, 'Australian Overseas Information Service photographs—Fact sheet 47', www.naa.gov.au/collection/factsheets/fs47.aspx, accessed 7 August 2017.