

The Ernest Fooks Collection

A transformative gift

Alan Pert and Naomi Mullumby

For university faculties of architecture, planning, environmental design and other disciplines relating to our built environment, access to unique collections can be transformative. The Rare Materials Collection of the University of Melbourne's Architecture, Building and Planning (ABP) Library enriches teaching programs by providing architectural precedents that stimulate discussion of design alternatives, foster design solutions, support research inquiry, and attract and enthuse audiences—both

locally and globally.¹ In 2019, the sesquicentennial celebrations of the Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning at the University of Melbourne offer an opportunity to reflect upon partnerships between the ABP Library and the academics and professionals who have helped to build our collections through their generous gifts and bequests, and our vision for the future as we steward these collections into the digital age.

The development of the ABP Library's rare materials collection has been principally via donations. The history of the Fooks donation is one of determination and altruism. In 1989, Noemi Fooks (née Noemija Matusevics, 1909–2013) offered to the ABP Library a collection related to her late husband, Ernest Fooks (Ernst Fuchs, 1906–1985)—architect, town planner, designer, theorist and artist—which included thousands of drawings and slides, as well as books, lecture notes, correspondence, scrapbooks, photograph albums and journals. A collection of such breadth offers many insights into the life of an émigré architect who not only helped shape Melbourne's built environment, but also contributed greatly to the city's social and cultural fabric. The couple's relationships with their local community and with the international design community are strongly evident.

At the time that Noemi donated the collection, the university was unable to house it in its entirety. As a result, she distributed the material between five institutions. Her intention was to preserve the evidence of her husband's legacy as a major influence among émigré architects of the period, and she set about finding the right homes for the many artefacts of Ernest Fooks' personal and professional life.² Her niece, Sandra Trehub, describes Noemi's enthusiasm for providing opportunities for new experiences, whether through travel, helping newly arrived immigrants, or creating



Opposite: Professor Alan Pert with students using material from the Ernest Fooks Collection for the subject Critical and Curatorial Practices in Design, 2016.

Below: Visitors viewing archival material in the dining room at the exhibition *Ernest Fooks: The house talks back*, held at 32 Howitt Road, North Caulfield, in December 2016. Photograph by Tatjana Plitt.

social connections in the community.³ Sandra explains Noemi's concerns with finding a place for the materials, 'and of course, she was concerned that maybe it wouldn't be of interest to people. But she was hoping it would ... It was important to her that if there was anything of value that it should have a home, the right home'.⁴ The five locations chosen by Noemi for Fooks' material were the ABP Library at the University of Melbourne, State

Library Victoria, the RMIT Design Archive, the Jewish Museum of Australia, and the Jewish Holocaust Centre.⁵

In the intervening years there was interest in the collections, but in all the institutions they remained largely uncatalogued, due to a lack of resources. Only those researchers who already knew of their existence—usually through Noemi's guidance—were able to make use of them. It was not until 2016 that the collections



The study at 32 Howitt Road, North Caulfield, as presented in the exhibition *Ernest Fooks: The house talks back*, in December 2016. Photograph by Tatjana Plitt.

were fully rediscovered and explored, when a group of University of Melbourne Master of Architecture students was given the opportunity to work directly with them as part of the subject Critical and Curatorial Practices in Design. Under the leadership of Professors Alan Pert and Philip Goad, students of this subject carried out in-depth archival research on Ernest Fooks, culminating in a public exhibition of their research and the work of Fooks, with an accompanying publication.⁶ The main difficulty for

the class was working with a collection that was both vast in scope and geographically separated. The main tasks for collection managers were providing access, supporting the students' research needs, and recording in a permanent way the links that the students uncovered between the collections and the context in which Fooks worked.

Working initially with three of the collections, the class created extensive records and discovered important connections between the various archives. Through



Ernst Fuchs, Costume design, Vienna, 1928, mixed media on paper, 14.0 × 21.5 cm. Inscribed lower right: *ERNST FUHCS* [*sic*] / *WELLSPACHER / WIEN. 1928*. Ernest Fooks Collection, Architecture, Building and Planning Library Rare Materials Collection, University of Melbourne Library.



networks between collection managers, it was discovered that the Jewish Holocaust Centre held part of the Fooks Collection, something that was previously unknown. The students collaborated with the collection managers to catalogue and digitise a large proportion of the material. The result of an intensive period of research was the bringing together of the archival collections in the exhibition *Ernest Fooks: The house talks back*. Over four days in December 2016, visitors were welcomed to 32 Howitt Road, North Caulfield, formerly the residence of Ernest and Noemi Fooks, which was designed and built by Ernest in 1954. The students used the home as both an artefact and a lens through which to examine the architect's larger body of work.⁷

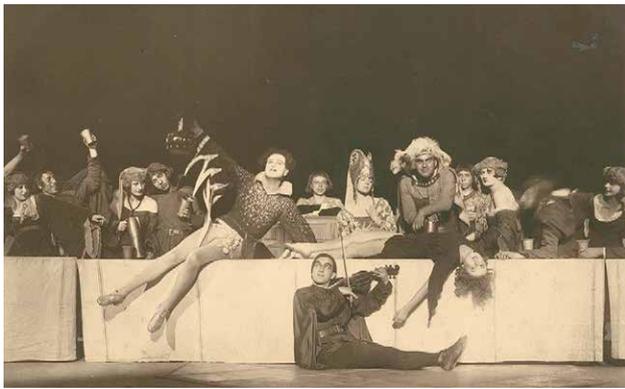
Each student explored a particular facet of the collection that appealed to them. For instance, in the university's archive is a collection of Fooks' writings. In popular magazines such as *The Women's Weekly* and *Australian Home Beautiful* he would describe his ideas on home design, with no detail deemed too small to be considered. Fooks' interest in the interior encompassed the design of cabinetry and kitchens. Student Ariani Anwar drew out this connection and presented an exhibit in the kitchen of 32 Howitt Road, titled *Equipment for living*, where she catalogued the kitchen's fittings and contents.

Fooks designed costumes while working with leading theatre and film director Max Reinhardt in Vienna in the late 1920s.⁸ In his exhibit *Costume designer*, student Matthew Greenwood displayed these designs in the house's cloak room, on specially designed hangers. The costume designs demonstrate the rich artistic knowledge and training that Fooks and other émigré architects brought with them to Australia from their homelands. Like many other émigré architects, Fooks developed an artistic practice alongside his principal study and practice

of architecture, urban planning (and, in Fooks' case, psychology).

Ernest and Noemi also had an extensive slide collection recording their travels, during which they explored architecture and culture in their many forms. The slides document the vernacular architecture, local building practices, and artistic and textile production of the countries they visited. Many of the students used the slide collection in their research: Aykiz Gokmen focused on the Fooks' travel to world expos, Mark Bligh undertook a comprehensive analysis of the travels (especially Ernest's slides of different types of dwellings) to curate *Carousel architecture* in the reading room, while in the living room Jane Mikhailova presented *From Strauss to Matilda and beyond: The story of three passports*.

The energy that the class brought to the task of researching the collections was inspiring. Connections between collections and institutions were rapidly made, and led to three unexpected events that directly enriched our understanding of the importance and context of the collection. Firstly, Professor Pert discovered a book that had been copied by hand in its entirety (including drawings) by Noemi and her brother in their younger years, possibly because they were unable to afford to purchase a copy. Secondly, Noemi's niece, Sandra Trehub, and former housekeeper, Natasha Shnayder, donated to the university the portraits of Ernest and Noemi by Louis Kahan that had hung together at 32 Howitt Road.⁹ And thirdly, Sandra Trehub from Canada was invited to Melbourne for the exhibition. During her visit she spoke with the students, and through this conversation many new facets and connections were revealed. It was decided to ask Catherine Townsend, a scholar of émigré architects who had interviewed Noemi Fooks in the later years of her life, to interview Sandra for the archive. Having a subject expert conduct



Left: Theatre production, *Das Mirakel (The miracle)* directed by Max Reinhardt, c. late 1920s, photographer unknown, photographic print, 16.8 × 12.0 cm. Ernest Fooks Collection, Architecture, Building and Planning Library Rare Materials Collection, University of Melbourne Library.

Below: Melbourne School of Design, *The house talks back* (exhibition catalogue), Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning, University of Melbourne, 2016. Architecture, Building and Planning Library Rare Materials Collection, University of Melbourne Library.

the interview shaped the discourse and ensured that the questions were informed and could draw the most out of the interviewee.¹⁰ The stories uncovered in the interview shed new light on the Fooks' lives. For the scholar, being able to hear Sandra recount some of Noemi and Ernest's experiences and their reactions to encountering new cultures through their travels adds new depth to the archive. The wide-ranging interview covers many aspects of Ernest and Noemi's lives, their adjustment to life in suburban Melbourne during the war, their participation in the community, the altruism that was to define their lives, and the importance of 32 Howitt Road as a home. The students' questions and Sandra's responses led to the realisation that oral histories can provide invaluable information and context that would otherwise be lost. This has highlighted the importance of interviewing donors. For future donations, library staff will consider recording oral histories, as the interviews give life to the material and capture personal memories that are unavailable through any other means.

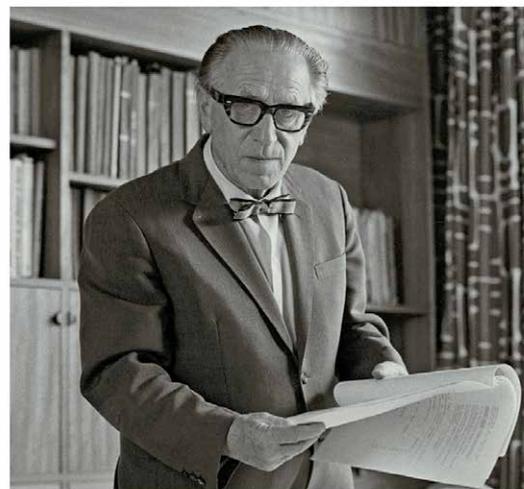
The legacy of the donation meant that staff and students could open up a discourse with new communities. It has also seen new potentials realised in a digital age where scholars, in partnership with librarians and cultural institutions, are active in creating the digital collection, with an emphasis on designing access, improving visibility and discovery, fostering active use and participation, and building collaborations.

Large digital collections can take some time to create and make publicly available; so far, only small parts of the distributed Fooks collections have been digitised. Each medium has its own requirements, bringing together five separate collections adds a further layer of complexity, and the creation of high-quality metadata (cataloguing and other information about each digitised item or series) is crucial. In working with the collections, the students

catalogued items and created metadata for them. Instead of simply populating hierarchical, pre-determined fields, they created records that reflected the particular collection they were working on, and their research focus. In so doing, some devised geographic metadata to establish new intellectual connections, while others concentrated on design, social and cultural connections. Although this added value and improved findability, the lack of formal metadata standards worked against making the material available on an institutional repository.



The House Talks Back



Noemi Fooks with a Masai woman in Kenya, photograph by Ernest Fooks, 1978, printed from 35 mm slide. Ernest Fooks Collection, Architecture, Building and Planning Library Rare Materials Collection, University of Melbourne Library.



For future projects, the aim is to provide a more formal framework for metadata creation, and, for a collection such as this where material is held by several institutions, to reach a consensus on what information is important. Planning is under way for the formal creation of an online archive to unite the Fooks collections, and we hope that the online archive will be realised soon.

Despite these practical difficulties, we received an unintentional gift when Noemi was forced to split up the collections between five institutions: we have all learned much about each other and from the students who have used the archives. To unite all the holdings online would be a significant achievement for all of us, and would fulfil Noemi's desire to find the right home. The legacy of the project for the 2016 students is to be able to incorporate their work with the archives into their professional lives. How that will inform their research and professional practice is unknown. But what is known is that once the digital collection emerges and the next set of researchers starts to look into the riches contained in the Fooks archive, all sorts of new potentials and possibilities will be discovered.

Authors' acknowledgements: We thank State Library Victoria, RMIT Design Archives, Jewish Museum of Australia, the Jewish Holocaust Centre, Melbourne School of Design, University of Melbourne Library, the students of Critical and Curatorial Practices in Design 2016, Professor Philip Goad, Catherine Townsend, Rebecca McLaughlan, Natasha Shnayder, Sandra Trehub and Tatjana Plitt.

Professor Alan Pert is director of the Melbourne School of Design. Internationally known for his creative practice research, he has worked extensively as an architect, exhibition designer and curator, while concurrently holding a role as professor of architecture.

Naomi Mullumby is the architecture, building and planning librarian at the University of Melbourne. She has a strong interest in the conservation and preservation of library collections through digitisation, and facilitating access through building digital collections.

The Architecture, Building and Planning Library is on the ground floor and basement levels of the Melbourne School of Design (Glyn Davis Building), Parkville campus. Visitors are welcome. For more information, see <https://library.unimelb.edu.au/architecture>, or contact the librarian on naomim@unimelb.edu.au.

- 1 The Architecture, Building and Planning Rare Materials Collection is composed of rare, valuable or fragile materials, and has strong holdings representing individual architects and architectural firms, as well as local architectural history. It includes 19th- and 20th-century material such as seminal architectural texts, collections of major Melbourne architects and planners, original drawings, sketchbooks and scrapbooks, and theses. Although many items were acquired by the university from the 1850s onwards, the collection largely has its origins in the library collection of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects, which was transferred to the university in 1969. Significant materials have been bequeathed over a long period, particularly from the estates of architects. For discussion of particular holdings, see for instance Naomi Mullumby and Natasha Story, 'The Architecture, Building and Planning Library Rare Materials Collection', *University of Melbourne Collections*, issue 22, June 2017, pp. 60–5; and Sarah Charing and David Nichols, "A pretty good collection of two by twos": Magic lantern glass slides in the Architecture, Building and Planning Library', *University of Melbourne Collections*, issue 17, December 2015, pp. 3–11.
- 2 'Noemi Fooks: An interview of Sandra Trehub by Catherine Townsend. Location Hotel Lindrum 26 Flinders Street Melbourne', 3 December 2016. Rare Materials Collection, Architecture, Building and Planning Library, University of Melbourne.
- 3 'Noemi Fooks: An interview of Sandra Trehub'.
- 4 'Noemi Fooks: An interview of Sandra Trehub'.
- 5 Architectural drawings went to State Library Victoria; other drawings and books went to the RMIT Design Archive; passports, artwork and ephemera went to the Jewish Museum of Australia and the Jewish Holocaust Centre; photographs, costume designs, publications and books came to the University of Melbourne.
- 6 Melbourne School of Design, *The house talks back* (exhibition catalogue), Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning, University of Melbourne, 2016.
- 7 [Alan Pert, Philip Goad and Catherine Townsend], 'Introduction', in *The house talks back*, p. 1.
- 8 Catherine Townsend, 'Ernest Fooks in Vienna', in *The house talks back*, p. 6.
- 9 The two portraits are now in the ABP Library Rare Materials Collection.
- 10 This recording is now held in the ABP Library Rare Materials Collection.