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GOLD-PLATED DOORS IF YOU WANT THEM: HOLGAR & HOLGAR AND THE ARCHITECTURE OF OPULENCE

Born in Poland, trained in Italy and employed in England, husband-and-wife architects John (1922-2006) and Helen Holgar (1923-2012) migrated to Australia in 1952 with first-rate modernist credentials. Working for noted Melbourne practices, the couple began their own in 1959 after success in an Ideal House contest. But while Holgar & Holgar was launched by a prize-winning glass-walled box, within a decade, the firm was Victoria's chief exponent of luxury dwellings for moneyed clients who craved opulence not seen since the 1930s.

The classic Holgar & Holgar mansion was palatial in every sense: grand staircases, cabanas, conversation pits, sunken baths, gold-plated taps, travertine, chandeliers, imported/bespoke furnishing, carefully chosen by the much-travelled architects. Exuding a Continental grandeur, their houses were labelled as 'European influenced' and 'Mediterranean flavoured', yet also evoked the parallel tradition of Hollywood glamour - a synthesis that came full circle when the Holgars designed a house in Beverly Hills in 1986.

Such passion for sumptuousness, and the Featurist palette of screens and arches, hints at other American links, like Edward Durrell Stone, Morris Lapidus and Tony Duquette. Like them, the Holgars' work was flouted by the professional vanguard, all but ignored by staid journals and catching attention only in the populist press. One key profile, published in Australian Property News in 1974, summated their view with a telling by-line: 'gold-plated doors if you want them'.

This paper will chart Holgar & Holgar's shift from hard-nosed modernism to high-end eclecticism, contextualising their mature work as a reawakening of luxurious living in post-war Australia (presaged by Freddie Asmussen, O.N. Coulson, Decor Associates, etc.), covering the local history of such memes as gold-plated taps, canopy ceilings and conversation pits, and considering the overseas context, from Liberace to Lapidus, via Charles Jencks's Daydream Houses of Los Angeles (1978) and more recent scholarship on Hollywood-style glamour.

While lesser known among Australian postwar architectural firms, the partnership of John and Helen Holgar was as well qualified as any. Both born in Poland, John (1922-2006) and Helen (1923-2012) met in Italy while studying architecture at the University of Rome.¹ Moving to London in 1947, they married, completed studies and gained experience with architects. Pondering a return to Poland, they opted instead to migrate to Australia, landing in Melbourne in 1952. Both starting out with Godfrey, Spowers, Hughes, Mewton & Lobb, John later worked for Arthur Purnell and Helen in Brian Lewis's private practice, later becoming an associate of hotel specialist D.F. Cowell Ham. After the couple won the 1957 Ideal Home contest with a severely modernist flat-roofed glass box, the resulting publicity spurred John to open his own office. After eighteen months with Grounds, Romberg & Boyd, Helen joined her husband in 1959 to form Holgar & Holgar.

While the couple's early work adopted the harsh modernism of their Ideal Home, the seeds of a more lavish approach emerged in their own house at Heidelberg. An early scheme (1960) evoked textbook modernity with butterfly roof and tight rectilinear planning. Aside from parquet, terrazzo and a partly sunken living room, there was little to suggest uncommon glamour.² A revised scheme (1962) lurched in that direction: the butterfly roof was flattened and the severe façade softened by a sinuous window wall forming an ovoid living room within; further geometrical play defined a hexagonal master bedroom, trapezoidal dressing room and diamond balcony. The foyer, with subtly curved wall, focused on a grand staircase "conceived as a free-floating sculptural form" with open treads and brass handrail, boldly top-lit by a round skylight. Finishes were carefully considered: reports noted "some of the new wallpapers now on the market", while "cupboards, doors, walls and ceilings have design treatments carried out by craftsmen specialists".³ Bathrooms were lined in Japanese ceramic tiles ("in patterns designed by the architects") and the kitchen floor in Torginol, a spray-on vinyl from the U.S.A.⁴ If the slick mirrored surface of this new product wasn't stylish enough, the Holgars went further by choosing a gold hue that literally launched a new golden era in their work.

Such glamour had seldom been seen in Melbourne's built environment since the 1930s. A pre-war thirst for Hollywood luxury, spurred by an entrenched culture of film-going and evidenced by genuine Beverly Hills mansions profiled regularly in the *Australian Home Beautiful*, was memorably realised not only in cinema design (*viz* Melbourne's State Theatre of 1929, co-designed by actual Los Angeles architect John Eberson) but also apartment blocks such as Howard Lawson's 'Beverly Hills' in South Yarra (1935), which evoked "the desired association with the palatial mansions of the stars and posh hotels of Los Angeles area, an image made known to the Australian public through magazines and the movies themselves".⁵ Such buildings encapsulated what Annette Condello has described as the "luxation of architecture", when certain styles, motifs or materials were perceived as exotic, and thus luxurious, when removed from an original context and transplanted to new locations.⁶

While Condello's historical survey of architectural luxury ended at the inter-war era, she noted the recurring pattern of "a continuous prompt to indulge still further in luxury".⁷ A key figure in the re-introduction of Hollywood glamour into Melbourne's austere post-war design scene was Freddie Asmussen (1913-1974), ballet dancer turned Myer display manager. Scandalously extravagant, his lust for lavish finishes (mainly gold) won him the titles "King Midas" and "Melbourne's own Sun King".⁸ No less extravagant in sourcing, he travelled often and spent much time in the U.S.A.⁹ His theatrical retail displays (from 1956, including the store's iconic Christmas windows) embodied pure luxury, masking prosaic substrates with gilding, beaten copper, precious stones, imported velvet and gold or silver lamé.

While Asmussen had some curious architectural links (he was first cousin to Ray Berg, and related by marriage to John Fisher of Stephenson & Turner), his own professional output focused on the ephemera of retail displays, Moomba floats and décor for charity galas and the Myer family's private parties. These were not without grandeur; his Louis XIV-themed ball at the Menzies Hotel in 1957 had genuine Hollywood glamour in guests Elizabeth Taylor and Michael Todd. Yet, the closest Asmussen got to architectural work was in his private life: his townhouse (with thirteen chandeliers and a garden of only white-blooming plants) and a Mount Eliza weekend (1955) that, lauded as "a small Versailles", had a pool edged with genuine Roman statuary.¹⁰ Interiors ranged from Chinese to Louis XIV, including a Napoleonic

living room with striped satin canopy ceiling in homage to New York decorator and socialite Lady Mendl (1859-1950), godmother of lavish interior design, whom he may well have met.¹¹

Asmussen had much in common with Lady Mendl's American protégé Tony Duquette (1914-1999), creator of Hollywood interiors and film sets, who "never saw a surface that could not be embellished, enriched, collaged and gilded".¹² His work also echoed that of Florida hotel architect Morris Lapidus (1902-2001), whose Fontainebleau Miami Beach (1954) was conceived when its designer "finally realised that American taste was influenced by the greatest mass media entertainment of that time, the movies... so I designed a movie set".¹³ Snubbed by the architectural press, the Fontainebleau won wide populist acclaim as far afield as Australia. It was briefly profiled in reputable local journal *Architecture & Arts* (then edited by staunchly pro-American Kenneth McDonald) and declared an "architectural extravaganza" in a two-page spread in the *Australian Women's Weekly*.¹⁴ Clearly, an antipodean craving for Hollywood glamour still bubbled below the surface.

Perhaps taking cues from Asmussen, other Melbourne design professionals adopted a lavish mode in the 1950s; most shared his theatre background. Oswald Noel Coulson (1905-1989) had written for the stage in the 1930s before opening an architectural office in 1950. Embracing landscape, interior and furniture design, he focused on residential work for Toorak gentry and duly cornered the market.¹⁵ One such house in Orrong Road had a grand foyer with chandeliers, wall niches, curved staircase with gilt balustrade, French wallpaper, *toile de jouty*, turquoise carpets ("specially woven in England") and bespoke furniture in rare timbers.¹⁶ A concurrent apartment fitout in Queens Road was no plainer, with aqua carpet, pink mirrored walls and a dining suite in limed timber, Portuguese marble and brocatelle.¹⁷ A younger man, dancer-turned-interior designer Roger Dunn (1927-1990) returned from working in London in the early 1950s to renovate a small flat for himself in Melbourne. Praised as "Hollywood luxury on an Australian budget", it evoked a credible aura of grandeur with architectural salvage, *trompe l'œil* mural by set designer Yvonne Francart and a chequered linoleum floor, aping marble.¹⁸ Nothing else, however, is known of Dunn's design career; even Coulson, while prolific and keenly sought by his niche clients, was (much like his peer Lapidus) all but ignored by the architectural press.

More enduring was the Sydney firm of Décor Associates, formed in 1959 by Warren 'Tom' Harding and David Lorimer. Their lust for Hollywood style emerged promptly; invited to partake in a charity exhibition to create a space for a public figure of their choice, Harding and Lorimer chose American actress Anne Baxter while other entrants opted for the likes of Googie Withers, Pattie Menzies and Richie Benaud. Their scheme for Baxter's sitting room in a "comfortable and luxurious townhouse" evoked West Coast glamour with American metallic wallpaper, hand-carved Italian wall plaques and limed timber furniture upholstered in velvet and silk.¹⁹ This star-struck approach also resonated with ordinary homeowners who had spent time in California. When one South Yarra housewife returned from two years in Hollywood, "her flair for interior design was awakened... she picked up hints from the homes of Beverly Hills and adapted them to suit her Melbourne house".²⁰ Her terrace was thus fitted with chandeliers, gilt mirrors, a four-poster bed ("a craze that's caught on across the Pacific"²¹) and silk wall-linings inspired by her visit to the former home of actress Veronica Lake.

By now, such motifs had become shorthand for domestic luxury. Canopy ceilings, pioneered in Asmussen's 1955 beach house, rapidly rose in popularity. One early champion was Sydney designer Leslie Walford, who added "a marvellous tented ceiling" when revamping his Darling Point flat in 1963.²² During this time, the conversation pit also emerged locally. Introduced in the mid-1950s by Bruce Goff, they were known locally as early as 1959, when the *Herald* cited a recent British example; local versions soon followed.²³ By 1962, they were modish enough for one magazine to dismiss them as "last year's innovation", only to run a feature article the next year reporting their rising popularity.²⁴

A fad for luxury bathrooms burgeoned in parallel. Post-war re-introduction of the traditionally indulgent sunken bath can again be credited to Bruce Goff; an Australian example "in a lovely new home at Point Piper" of 1962, used Italian mosaic tiles in a gold Greek key motif, coupled with marble bench, gilt stool and "taps, towel-racks, drawer handles and mirror frames, gold plated to match".²⁵ The year before, musing on homebuilding economics in his *Age* column, Neil Clerehan quipped that "there is always, every year, someone who will have gold plumbing fittings".²⁶ Such folkloric excess had not been seen in Australia for years, or only read about in reports of Hollywood stars like Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks, whose mansion, completed in 1924 and often cited as the first truly lavish celebrity home in Beverly Hills, had a bathroom with gold-plated fittings including towel rails in the form of tasselled rope.²⁷ In 1958, it was reported here that sales of gold taps had risen 400% in the U.S.A.; a spokesman stated that "gold plated

bathroom fittings have always been the ultimate in luxury... I suspect part of it is the conspicuous consumption motive: 'look, I can even afford golden faucets!'.²⁸

When gold-plated taps became commercially available in Australia in 1965, it reflected a desire for gilt finishes that had increased over time.²⁹ Overseas examples, like the gold-leafed columns and mesh ceilings of Edward Durrell Stone's U.S. Embassy in India, captured local attention.³⁰ Australian designers slated their own gilt complexes more cheaply, typified by the gold-painted ceiling of a 1959 bistro fitout by Laszlo Ernest.³¹ This era saw a fad for gold-anodized metal – a seductive finish that, like conversation pits, sunken baths and shag carpet, was re-introduced in the post-war era by Bruce Goff (a provenance unbeknownst to most Australian architects, as his work seldom then appeared in local journals).³² Such deceit was denounced here by Robin Boyd (no fan of Goff), who dismissed "veneer temptations" such as "gold, more brilliant than any alchemist dreamed, in rolls of plastic".³³

This new era of luxury saw Holgar & Holgar move beyond spartan modernism towards a more lavish style: a shift that can be dated to mid-1964. Two projects published in April, the Slade House in Toorak and the Weisbrem House in Caulfield, were grand in scale but understated in detail; nothing in their write-ups suggested especial opulence within.³⁴ In late May, an article on the Engel House in Brighton East denoted a changing mood.³⁵ Its stark expression as a hovering Seidlerian volume belied unprecedented splendour within. Its foyer had another sweeping circular stair ("on a single reinforced concrete stringer with open timber treads"³⁶) with gold-anodized balustrade, top-lit by a round skylight. Four living areas provided for lavish entertaining and a vast master bedroom, 12 by 17 feet, could have been Melbourne's largest since the War. The severe exterior was softened by a subtle yet glitzy touch – a feature wall of green Italian marble – while the rear terrace incorporated two curved staircases that were more Bernini than Belluschi. Such allusions did not slip by unheeded; the next year, Holgar & Holgar's entry in a competition for a major city project was described as "the most baroque of all the entries, and far too exotic an idea for Melbourne".³⁷

This shift towards more flagrant luxury was prompted by overseas travel. In Spring 1964, Helen Holgar left the office in John's hands and returned to Poland for the first time in two decades.³⁸ Ostensibly a personal trek to re-visit relatives, it was to have potent architectural repercussions. Aside from Warsaw, Helen visited Lisbon, London, Paris, Stockholm and Copenhagen (where "the high standard of local craft made a big impression on me") before returning to Melbourne laden with inspiration and photographs.³⁹ Overseas travel became a passion; its effect on the Holgars' maturing style cannot be overstated. Fluent in English, Polish, Italian, French (and some German), the couple had no barrier to surveying new trends on the Continent. Undated photographs in the Holgar archive record visits to France, Italy, Austria, Switzerland, Los Angeles and New York, and the modern decor seen in exhibitions, galleries and shops. An evocative snapshot shows Helen, in smart leopard skin coat, deep in thought beside a vast chandelier in the foyer of New York's Helmsley Palace Hotel. She later reflected: "We've travelled quite a lot and seen quite a lot... many of our clients have also travelled a lot and they may say they like something of character in Hong Kong, Acapulco, London or Stockholm, and we've probably seen it."⁴⁰

Something must be said of a nexus between well-travelled émigré architects and the creation of luxury homes. By 1965, the Holgars were not the only ex-Europeans mining this rich vein: Latvian-born Leonid Svikers designed a lavish courtyard house in Brighton with cabana and guest wing, while a Balwyn house that Romanian-born Grigore Hirsch created for a Polish family offered unmatched luxury in its services such as ducted vacuum system, air-conditioning plant and remote-controlled front door with intercom.⁴¹ Czech-born Ernest Fooks and his wife had no children, yet their new house at Caulfield spanned 34 squares (again with cabana and guest suite) with crystal chandeliers, terrazzo floors, gold fabrics and bespoke doorknobs.⁴² Grandeur still was the three-storey eighty-square mansion that Austrian-born Walter Pollock designed on Brighton's Esplanade, with sauna, gymnasium, maid's quarters, wine cellar, rumpus room, living room with conversation pit (perhaps Melbourne's first) and master bathroom with mosaic-tiled kidney-shaped sunken tub.⁴³ As reported in the local press, "it could take a place in Beverly Hills, California"⁴⁴.

Such American links are ably shown by the plush Canberra house that Melbourne-based Czech émigré architect Miles Jakl (1923-2010) designed for Yugoslav-born restaurateur Peter Vidovic. Terrazzo steps led to a grand entry with double doors in solid timber, while the interior ran rife with items already well accepted as the lexicon of residential luxury: parquet, chandeliers, Japanese grasspaper, Thai silk, gold carpet and bathroom with sunken tub, gold-plated taps, topaz-faceted glass handles, gold mirrors and gold fur-napped rug on mosaic tile floor.⁴⁵ Jakl's homage to Hollywood glamour proved prescient; soon after the house was finished, he yielded to the pull of California consumerism and moved to Los Angeles, practising there as an architect for the next quarter-century.

Admittedly, such projects represented rare forays into deep luxury for their designers. What set the Holgars apart was that they worked in this mode for another three decades. By 1968, it could already be said that they “have a reputation for high-grade housing designs”.⁴⁶ Their Goldberg House in Toorak (1967) provided dining room for ten, marble-lined dance floor and “imported fittings including an unusual crystal light which adds appeal to the dining room décor”.⁴⁷ The master bathroom was “fully tiled in imported marble, and overlooking the bath, a large plastic-coated photographic mural of a mountain lake scene”.⁴⁸ Similar themes resonated in the Tepperman House (1967), spread over five levels on a steep site at Kew.⁴⁹ Here, lavish finishes such as hand-painted Italian tiles and marble terrazzo (to foyer, terraces and curved staircase) merged with the latest in domestic utilities (double stainless-steel sink with waste disposal and detergent dispensers) and fastidiously bespoke items such as beaten brass coat-hooks and a built-in umbrella stand with copper drainage tray.

If one single building captured the glamour of the Holgars’ 1960s work, it must be the Selwyn House in Toorak (1968). Sited in an exclusive cul-de-sac, it was commissioned by Jewish businessman Alan Selwyn as a grand residence for himself, his wife and their daughter. Accommodating only a small family, this partially two-storeyed house was literally palatial. Conceived for lavish entertaining, its lower level provided a maze of living areas including a vast living/dining room with conversation pit, two courtyard patios and a pisciform cabana/dance floor with podium and change rooms. (Fig. 1) Befitting a house styled as “a modern mansion”,⁵⁰ service areas evoked a Victorian-era counterpart, with servant’s wing, huge kitchen, pantry, scullery and breakfast nook. While only three bedrooms were provided upstairs, the master suite took up most of the floor, with *en suite* bathroom, adjacent solarium, separate dressing rooms for husband and wife, and an area off the bedroom labelled as the “lady’s lounge”.⁵¹



FIGURE 1 Cabana interior, Selwyn House, Toorak (Holgar & Holgar, 1969), *Australian Women's Weekly*, 27 August 1969, 74. Photograph by Les Gorrie. Reproduced courtesy of Bauer Media Group.

Setting aside its sheer scale, the house was palatial in fitting and finishes. The cabana was roofed with a clear plastic bubble-dome, with canvas canopies for summertime use. There was silk wallpaper, deep pile carpet (including an eye-popping zebra print), gold velvet, “crystal chandeliers intricately worked with gold filigree” and “beautiful and unusual furniture”.⁵² Much of it was sourced in Europe, either off the shelf (French patio furniture and Aubusson rugs; Italian cane furniture) or bespoke (a marble-topped dining table; an ornately carved gilt bedhead). By Mrs Selwyn’s admission, the *piece de résistance* was her upstairs bathroom with a sunken tub “large enough to be called a mini swimming pool”, blue mosaic tiling, dragon-shaped gold-plated taps and “Mediterranean inspired mural”.⁵³ (Fig 2) Lest any doubt remained that this was Selwyn’s house, the façade incorporated a Moorish screen based on a repeated motif of the letter ‘S’. (Fig 3)



FIGURE 2 Bathroom interior, Selwyn House, Toorak (Holgar & Holgar, 1969), *Australian Women's Weekly*, 2 April 1969, 93 Photograph by Les Gorrie. Reproduced courtesy of Bauer Media Group



FIGURE 3 Exterior, Selwyn House, Toorak (Holgar & Holgar, 1969). Photograph by author, 2011.

A contemporary chronicler of the Holgars' work observed that "there has always been a touch of Hollywood about Melbourne's elite suburb, Toorak".⁵⁴ As the couple's premier statement in opulence, the Selwyn House adhered closely to the custom of lavish Californian living. The Pop-Arabian canopies echoed Hollywood celebrities who "have tents, awnings and *porte-cocheres* as if their house were a Sultan's hotel".⁵⁵ The Featurist facade screen, seldom seen in Australian houses, evoked those of such Beverly Hills residents as Debbie Reynolds, Jimmy Durante and Groucho Marx, while the saucer dome and Moorish arcades recalled Danny Thomas's hilltop abode.⁵⁶ The use of the letter 'S' echoes the possessive bent of Liberace, who stamped an 'L' on everything from his front gate to his brandy goblets.⁵⁷ The Selwyn's ornate bedhead recalled the "Late Baroque Pianoism"⁵⁸ of Liberace's boudoir (with llama-pelt bedspread), or that of Zsa Zsa Gabor, with a bed "very like a throne, and deservedly so".⁵⁹

Hollywood houses of this ilk were caricatured in the 1969 Blake Edwards film, *The Party*, with Peter Sellars as a clumsy Indian actor mistakenly invited to a film producer's slick modern pad. Many elements of that house, from conversation pit and shag carpet to sunken bath and embedded swimming pool, recurred in the Holgars' work. Indeed, the bold wallpaper in the Selwyn's cabana, with Spanish-style tile pattern, is identical to that in the kitchen of the film's setting. This wallpaper also appeared in Graham Kennedy's contemporaneous hilltop house at Frankston, underlining the belief that well-off Melburnians keenly pursued Hollywood élan.⁶⁰ Not surprising for a T.V. star whose lust for American culture saw him travel there often, Kennedy's bayside eyrie also aped West Coast style in its chocolate brown carpet, imported gold wallpaper, and chairs upholstered in gold leather or gold velvet.⁶¹ The mock-colonial St. Ives mansion of Kennedy's Sydney counterpart, flamboyant disc-jockey Ward "Pally" Austin, likewise reflected its owner's pro-

American bias via tigerskin rugs, gilded doors and a carpeted bathroom with sunken marble tub and gold-plated taps.⁶²

The fact that Pally Austin's house was designed by a Danish émigré brings one back to the nexus between heightened luxury and migrant architects. By 1970, however, younger local architects, born and trained here, were dabbling in the style. John Baulch, late of Jim Earle's office, designed a house at Templestowe with a bathroom to make Jayne Mansfield squirm: white shagpile carpet, gold-plated taps and a kidney-shaped sunken tub in pink mosaic tiles.⁶³ At the same time, project housing magnate Mike Warson (of Glenvil Homes) engaged Begg & Douglas to design his new house in Toorak. Gordon Douglas, who had worked for Le Corbusier in India in the early 1960s, prepared "something that looked recycled from Chandigarh".⁶⁴ As a joke, a lowly employee prepared his own scheme that, conceived in a spirit of friendly satire, adopted the Holgar palette of curving walls and arcades. To the firm's astonishment, Warson chose the latter scheme. Published (tongue-in-check) in 1972, it was lauded for "blending the mystery of the Far East with the glamour of the Middle East" and further stated to be "probably even more exotic" than a Holgar & Holgar house recently completed in nearby Linlithgow Road.⁶⁵ Why Polish-born Warson (*ne* Warszawski) didn't engage the couple in the first place remains a mystery.

Meanwhile, the Holgars' stranglehold on residential luxury only increased. Interviewed in 1974, they were described as: "a husband and wife team whose dream-like Mediterranean creations have attracted a millionaire clientele. These are clients to whom money is no object... they want marble flooring, sunken baths, gold-plated door and bathroom fittings, \$2,000 chandeliers, thermal swimming pools, \$10,000 spent on landscaping, even lifts".⁶⁶ It was further noted that such houses were as large as 140 squares, and that more money was spent on finishes than on structure. This is surely evident from such examples as the Kurtz House in Caulfield (1973), which not only had the mandatory conversation pit and marble-lined bathroom with sunken tub and gold taps, but also imported Italian travertine cladding and floor tiles, a Murano glass chandelier and Hans Poulsen pendant light.⁶⁷ Artisan silversmith Don Sheil was engaged to produce bespoke metalwork for kitchen benches, table and a textured gold-toned front door. (Fig 4) The Kurtz's entrancing entrance was perhaps the nearest the Holgars got to the 'gold-plated door' half-jokingly referenced in their 1974 interview. Skyrocketing gold prices after 1970 rendered such excess unviable. Even Liberace, who entered his own Los Angeles mansion through a gold-plated door, declared in 1973 that "with gold so expensive now, I'm sure glad I had most of my gold-leafing done years ago".⁶⁸



FIGURE 4 Kitchen interior, Kurtz House, Caulfield (Holgar & Holgar, 1973). Source: Holgar & Holgar Archive (private collection, Melbourne). Photographer unknown. Reproduced courtesy of the Holgar family.

Yet, still more palatial was the Holgars' Saade House at Black Rock (1975), built for a large Lebanese family who sought to regain the lost glamour of their patriarch's Middle Eastern heritage.⁶⁹ The five-bedroom bayside mansion ticked every Holgar box: circular sunken bathtub with gold taps, formal staircase curving around a surging chandelier from a skylight, marble floors, gold wallpaper, mirrored panels and hand-painted tiles. Externally, these and other Holgar houses from the early '70s were enlivened by parabolic arches and sub-Niemeyer curves (Fig. 5) that anticipated jocular labels (such as "Henry Moorish", "Ronchamp Ski-jump" and "De Chirico Aubergine") soon to be coined by

Charles Jencks in his 1978 book, *Daydream Houses of Los Angeles*.⁷⁰ Viewing such houses through a lens of half-serious scholarly attention, Jencks sought to reclaim them as a genuine if divergent strand of modernism. Similarly, Holgar & Holgar's work began to accrue respectability from the mid-1970s. This seems to have been part of a broader acceptance of stylistic diversity that saw Australian architects re-discover Holgarish progenitor Bruce Goff. That decade saw a Goff-themed issue of *Building Ideas* (praising him for "departing radically from established forms to create new spatial experiences"), his influence emerging in the work of such locals as Peter Jansen and Glyn Lewis, and an Australian lecture tour by the architect himself in 1979.⁷¹



FIGURE 5 Exterior, Gelbart House, Toorak (Holgar & Holgar, 1971). Photograph by author, 2011.

Yet, as tastes changed into the 1980s, the Holgars continued to deal in opulence. The second Goldberg House in Toorak (1984) was defined by bronze- and peach-tinted mirrors, brass railings and shaped travertine. Many items were bespoke or imported, or both. Lighting alone included Murano chandeliers from Italy, Louis Poulson H.P. Artichoke lights from Denmark and items from Roche Bobois in Paris, while a built-in aquarium was custom-made by a firm based in Manhattan's Decoration & Design Building. As if this name-dropping was not enough, interior elevations even specified the artists whose work would be displayed thereon: Dali, Chagall and Rubin. The Goldberg House was otherwise notable in that it prompted a follow-up commission from the client's daughter Faye and son-in-law Ron Efron, a leading Los Angeles building contractor. The Holgars thus came to design a mansion in North Camden Drive, off Sunset Boulevard, an exclusive pocket of Beverly Hills whose former residents included Gene Kelly, Lupe Velez, Lana Turner and Carl Reiner.⁷² Fittingly grand, the Efron House (1986) provided everything from conversation pit and sunken bath to sauna, library and 'ladies' lounge'. While by no means their final luxurious project (the vast Baker House in Toorak followed in 1991), the Efron House fittingly saw the Holgars' enduring passion for Hollywood glamour return to its wellspring.

Privately referred to by architectural peers as 'Vulgar & Vulgar', the work of John & Helen Holgar was long excluded from the local modernist canon and rarely acknowledged in mainstream architectural discourse. Writing of their Selwyn House as recently as 1999, Philip Goad cautioned that "overlooked by orthodox historians and heritage bodies, houses such as this one are in danger of disappearing entirely".⁷³ Recent scholarship has rehabilitated the reputations of comparable American architects such as Lapidus, Goff and Durrell Stone, now seen as seminal figures that "contributed to the evolution of modern architecture by directly engaging with new technologies, popular visual imagery and the cultural aspirations of post-war Americans".⁷⁴ Ultimately, they all formed part of a significant subset of designers on both sides of the Pacific Ocean who "shared an approach to representation, image-making and audience rooted in the notion of distinctive American glamour".⁷⁵

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