

# Register of Significant Twentieth Century Architecture

**RSTCA No:** R074

**Name of Place:** Holy Trinity Lutheran Church

**Other/Former Names:**

**Address/Location:** 22 Watson Street TURNER 2612

Block 10 Section 38 of Turner

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Listing Status:	Registered	Other Heritage Listings:	
Date of Listing:	December 1990	Level of Significance:	National
Citation Revision No:		Category:	Religious
Citation Revision Date:	July 2001	Style:	Ecclesiastical

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Date of Design:	1960	Designer:	Grounds Romberg & Boyd (Romberg)
Construction Period:	1961	Client/Owner/Lessee:	Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Date of Additions:	c1979	Builder:	Civic & Civic Contractors Pty Ltd

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## Statement of Significance

The Holy Trinity Finnish Lutheran Church designed by Frederick Romberg of Grounds Romberg and Boyd, exhibits particular architectural features specific to the Late Twentieth-Century Ecclesiastical (1960-) with its strong geometry, plain wall surfaces, unbroken straight lines emphasising verticality, glazing with vertically proportioned panes and spire reminiscent of a Gothic fleche.

The church is both distinctive and an integral part of the community. The building's religious nature is only obvious from the striking tapered spire which rises to a height of 20.7 metres. The exaggerated roof and wide eaves makes reference to the traditional Australian homestead, while the tripartite front elevation of alternating concrete block and glazed areas housing meeting room and east and west narthex, belongs to the Palladian tradition of Australia's rural architecture. The size, scale and materials of the church are domestic in character.

A church of considerable architectural merit, demonstrating a new and innovative architectural response to the need of Lutheran liturgy for a preaching space with the congregation close to the pulpit. The relationship between the exterior and the interior is well integrated, unified by a roof form which achieves an upward flow of space into the light concentrated at the apex around the spire. As a symbolic vertical motif, the spire is an important element of the exterior. The strong geometric form of the church is characteristic of the work of Grounds Romberg and Boyd, and is comparable to the Shine Dome of the Australian Academy of Science.

The architecture of the church informs our understanding of mid twentieth-century church architecture as well as our understanding of the development of late twentieth-century architectural styles.

Grounds Romberg and Boyd is recognised as one of Australia's most significant architectural firms of the twentieth century. Frederick Romberg who was responsible for the church's design, is recognised as one of the significant architects of the modern movement in Australia.

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## Description

The Holy Trinity Finnish Lutheran Church is designed in the Late Twentieth-Century Ecclesiastical style by Frederick Romberg of Grounds Romberg & Boyd. The church exhibits particular architectural elements specific to the style including strong geometry, plain wall surfaces, unbroken straight lines emphasising verticality, glazing with vertically proportioned panes and modern spire reminiscent of a Gothic fleche.

Located on the corner of Watson and Gould Streets in Turner, Canberra the church positioned on a north-south axis with its west and south walls running parallel with Watson and Gould Streets. The church was officially opened on 27<sup>th</sup> August 1961 by the Hon A.R. Downer MP, Minister for Immigration and a plaque marking this occasion is located in the east narthex, now the main entrance.

The church is symmetrical and square in plan, utilising traditional structural and construction methods. It is steel framed with an overhanging asbestos cement shingled double pitched roof, crowned by a tapered square spire on a skylight of orange acrylic. The building has an area of 343 square metres with a roof area of 566 square metres. There is a strong relationship between the exterior and the interior, as they are unified by a roof form which achieves an inspirational upward flow of space into the light concentrated at the apex around the spire. As a symbolic vertical motif, the spire is an important element of the exterior.

Externally three elevations have central walls of grey concrete grille Besser blocks. The external back wall is of bare concrete Besser blocks. Other walls are glazed with stained joinery and timber boarding, as are the soffits of the eaves and the roof lining. The wall and ceiling linings, windows and doors are Mountain Ash. The main entrance to the church is from the corner porch to the east narthex.

The exaggerated roof and wide eaves makes reference to the form of the traditional Australian homestead, while the tripartite front elevation of alternating concrete block and glazed areas, belongs to an earlier Palladian tradition. The size, scale and materials of the church are domestic in character, the building's religious nature only obvious from the tapered spire which rises to a height of 20.7 metres.

The church architecture demonstrates a new and innovative response to the need of Lutheran liturgy for a preaching space, with the congregation close to the pulpit. The main room was designed as a T- shape with the nave running up to the altar table and pulpit raised on a podium, the baptistery in the east wing and the choir in the west wing.

The relatively small internal space is provided with a warm glow from the light filtered through the skylight under the spire. The nave is warmed by a ceiling lined in Mountain Ash. The original light fitting hangs from the skylight. The internal concrete Besser block walls are painted white. The nave seating is the original Mountain Ash timber benches which seat 144. This can be increased to 200 by a sliding partition to the committee room/meeting room. The heating, originally under the timber benches, has been removed and three electric heaters have been mounted on the walls around the nave. At the northern end of the nave is a raised podium with railings to the front housing the altar table. The wall behind has a simple timber cross.

The church is designed as a dual purpose space combining worship and social activity. Starting at the entrance in the east narthex and moving clockwise they include a committee/meeting room, library in the west narthex, storage room, office, storage room, toilets and kitchen all located around the nave.

When constructed, the church had three functioning entrances, at the north west, south west (west narthex) and south east (east narthex). All doors are still in place, however, the west narthex is now used as a library, and internally a book case covers the door. A path leads from the porch to the footpath on Watson Street. There was originally a choir and organ to the north west and a baptistery to the north east. These areas were originally open to the nave and light penetrated through the grille Besser blocks onto the altar. The former choir area and baptistery were partitioned off c1979 with timber panelling and glass, to match the materials in the church. These areas are now used as an office in place of the choir area and storage in place of the baptistery.

The partitioning off has altered the penetration of light into the building and closed of the space around the altar.

Externally two small pools are located to the south and east of the church, they are bordered with grey concrete pavers. They are positioned half under the eaves which come to a projection over the pools to allow rain water from the roof to flow into the pools. The two pools are surrounded by shrub and bamboo plantings.

A manse constructed at a different time is located to the north west of the church.

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### **Condition and Integrity**

In 2001, the church is generally in excellent condition. Minor water leakage through the roof has occurred. There is also minor weathering to the asbestos shingles of the roof and the timber paneling under the eaves. The two square ponds are overgrown with plantings. Internal alterations c1979 included the addition of partitions to what was the baptistery and choir, removal of the original heating under the timber seating and replacement with three electric wall heaters. The originally unpainted interior Besser block walls have been painted white.

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### **Background/History**

In the 1960s there were two Lutheran Churches in Canberra, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Turner and the United Evangelical Lutheran Church at St Peters, Reid.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church had plans for the construction of a church on the subject site in Turner from at least 1951 when plans were drawn up by a local Canberra architect. These plans had the church in the more traditional position with the altar located to the east of the building with the church at a 45 degree angle to Watson and Gould Streets.

### **Modern Church Architecture**

From the early 1960s the suburbs of Australian cities saw the construction of many churches to cater for the religious needs of migrants from Europe and the Middle East. The design of these churches followed two main themes either traditional or radical. In both the nave was made wider and shorter in a move away from the heavily symbolic rituals of the past. Generally churches were modest in scale due to the small finances and size of the congregations.

As seen in the Holy Trinity Church the vertical motif arising from Gothic architecture was frequently used, the spire pointing heaven ward. Freer forms of expression were also often used. Church architecture still aimed to be distinctive whilst at the same time, attempting to integrate the building into the community. This contrast in design themes is achieved in the Holy Trinity Church where distinctiveness is obtained by the roof that features an upward flow of space culminating in the delicate lines of the spire. The church is also very domestic in scale promoting its integration into the community. The design of the church utilises stylistic elements and everyday materials, with its squat square plan with wide overhanging eaves and the use of glass and Australian timber.

As Freeland notes, the building expansion in Australia from 1955 saw the construction of many religious buildings, which were often the most interesting of the new architecture. He writes

'Many of the new churches were merely eye-catching spectacles of points, draping roofs and triangular blocks garishly coloured; but numbers of them, such as the Lutheran Church designed by Grounds, Romberg and Boyd at Canberra, a squat square building impaled at its centre on a slim soaring spire, and the Wentworth Memorial Church at Vaucluse designed by Clarke, Gazzard and Partners, were at the one time both simple and beautiful, sheltering and inspirational, close to the earth and soaring, timeless yet of the minute, strong yet sensitive'.

### **Romberg Grounds and Boyd**

Roy Grounds, Frederick Romberg and Robin Boyd were in partnership as Grounds Romberg and Boyd between 1953-1962. Together and individually they were among Australia's most influential

architects, and their work continues to have a major influence today. They had a major role in the development of modern architecture in Australia, working principally in Melbourne.

The firm undertook a number of buildings in Canberra, the most renowned being Grounds' Academy of Science Building (1958). Grounds also designed the Phillips House (1959), and Vasey Crescent Group (1960), and Boyd designed the Zoological Building at ANU (1963).

The design of the Holy Trinity Church is attributed to Frederick Romberg (within the partnership of Grounds Romberg and Boyd). Romberg was a member of the Lutheran Church and had designed a number of buildings for the church in Melbourne including the Lutheran Church Hall, South Melbourne (1953), alterations to Luther House, Melbourne (1957) and Luther College, Croydon (1958). Romberg may therefore have been a logical choice when the Lutheran Church decided to proceed with the construction of a church in Canberra. The completion of the impressive Academy of Science building (1958) by Grounds within the partnership may have also led the Church to choose Romberg.

### ***Frederick Romberg***

Frederick Romberg (1913-1992) was born in Tsing Tao, China, brought up in Germany, and studied architecture at the Federal Technical Institute, Zurich, (1933-38) under Friedrich Hess, Dr William Dunkel and Otto Salvisberg. He moved to Australia in 1938 and worked briefly for Stephenson & Turner before setting up in private practice with Mary Turner Shaw.

Romberg introduced analytical European modernism to Australia with his 'Newburn' flats (1939-1941 with Mary Turner Shaw), South Melbourne, the first reinforced concrete multi-storey residential building in Victoria. The flats were angled and staggered to gain park views whilst retaining privacy for each balcony. In his 'Glenunga' flats (1940), Armadale, Melbourne, he used Swiss *Heimatsil* elements, including random rubble stonework, a monopitch roof and exposed rafter ends. This 'humanised' Modernism had a significant influence on Australian architects in the late 1940s and 1950s.

Romberg's most celebrated work is the large 'Stanhill' flats (1942-1950), South Melbourne, which has complex, staggered, white-rendered rectilinear forms and dramatic horizontal balconies at the rear. From 1953 to 1962 Romberg practiced in partnership with Grounds and Boyd. Romberg was responsible for most of the firm's institutional and industrial work, including the curtain walled ETA Foods Factory (1957-1960), Braybrook, Melbourne. Other larger projects included McCaughey Court student residences (1965-8 with Boyd), Ormond College, University of Melbourne.

Romberg's architecture was formed in the context of 1930s European modernism and put into practice in Australia. His underlying concern was to produce an architecture suitable to the local condition and environment in Australia. He focussed on the use of local materials within the formal framework of modernism later adopting the popular forms of Australian rural architecture, in particular the homestead.

The majority of Romberg's work was undertaken in Melbourne. The Holy Trinity Lutheran Church is said to have been one of Romberg's favourite works. Romberg was awarded the RAI (Victorian Chapter) President's Prize in 1983 for his past, present and future service to architecture and the community in Victoria.

### ***Holy Trinity Lutheran Church***

The Holy Trinity Lutheran Church was built by Civil and Civic Contractors Pty Ltd and the consulting engineers were John Connell & Associates. The church was constructed in 1960-61 and opened on 27 August 1961.

The Church is square in plan, as used by Romberg in the Sacred Heart Girl's School, Oakleigh (1954). The combination of brick Besser block walls, with elaborate eaves and planking work, used was a theme shared by Grounds and Romberg. Romberg also used it in the Ormond College buildings and Grounds used it in the Master's Lodge at Ormond College. These buildings like the Church are dominated internally by concentric wood panelling, split towards the centre by glass and stepped up so that large and seemingly heavy sections of the ceiling appear to float.

Romberg's plankwork ceilings occur again in his Ormond College Library, combined with raked brickwork.

The church was designed to suit the beliefs of the Lutheran Church, with their taste for limited decoration. This can be seen internally with the relatively small internal space receiving its decoration by the play of light in the interior. A warm glow filtered through the skylight under the spire and the light shining through the grille Besser blocks to the choir and baptistery. At the northern end of the nave was a raised podium home to the altar table and pulpit. A simple timber cross hung on the wall behind.

The church was considered to be of architectural significance from when it was built. The eminent architectural photographer Max Dupain took photographs of the church c1962 for an article in the magazine *Architecture in Australia*. His photographs highlight the play of light within the building and the architectural qualities of the interior space. Photographs have also been taken of the church by Australian photographer Wolfgang Sievers.

Romberg in his design for the Canberra Lutheran Church may have been influenced by the design of the Zion Lutheran Church, Portland Oregon (1949-50) by Pietro Belluschi. St Johns Presbyterian Church, Warrandyte (1964) by Hipwell Weight & Ross, architects utilises a number of design elements in similarity with the Canberra Lutheran Church. The Warrandyte church is a small triangular church with copper fleche, grey concrete tile roof, grey concrete blocks and stained timber.

The two Canberra based Lutheran congregations later joined and the Turner church was given to the Finnish congregation c1970. The choir and baptistery were partitioned off c1979 in timber panelling and glass, to match the materials in the church. These areas are now used as an office in place of the choir area and storage in place of the baptistery.

In 2001 there are approximately 300 members and the Sunday service is well attended.

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### **Analysis against the Criteria specified in Schedule 2 of the Land (Planning and Environment) Act 1991**

*(i) a place which demonstrates a high degree of technical and/or creative achievement, by showing qualities of innovation or departure or representing a new achievement of its time*

The Holy Trinity Finnish Lutheran Church is of considerable architectural merit, demonstrating a new and innovative architectural response to the need of Lutheran liturgy for a preaching space, with the congregation close to the pulpit.

*(ii) a place which exhibits outstanding design or aesthetic qualities valued by the community or a cultural group*

The relationship between the exterior and the interior of the church is remarkable, as they are unified by a roof form which achieves an inspirational upward flow of space into the light concentrated at the apex around the spire. As a symbolic vertical motif, the spire is an important element of the exterior. The strong geometric form of the church is characteristic of the work of the architectural firm Grounds Romberg and Boyd, comparable to the Shine Dome of the Australian Academy of Science.

The church is both distinctive whilst at the same time an integral part of the community. The building's religious nature is only obvious from the striking tapered spire which rises to a height of 20.7 metres. The exaggerated roof and wide eaves makes reference to the traditional colonial homestead, while the tripartite front elevation of alternating concrete block and glazed areas housing meeting room and east and west narthex, also belongs to an earlier Palladian tradition. The size, scale and materials of the church are domestic in character.

The church is of national significance.

*(iii) a place which demonstrates a distinctive way of life, taste, tradition, religion, land use, custom, process, design or function which is no longer practised, is in danger or being lost, or is of exceptional interest*

*(iv) a place which is highly valued by the community or a cultural group for reasons of strong or special religious, spiritual, cultural, educational or social associations*

*(v) a place which is the only known or only comparatively intact example of its type*

*(vi) a place which is a notable example of a class of natural or cultural places or landscapes and which demonstrates the principal characteristics of that class*

The Holy Trinity Finnish Lutheran Church exhibits particular architectural elements specific to the Late Twentieth-Century Ecclesiastical style (1960-) with its strong geometry, plain wall surfaces, unbroken straight lines emphasising verticality, glazing with vertically proportioned panes and spire reminiscent of a Gothic fleche.

*(vii) a place which has strong or special associations with person, group, event, development or cultural phase which played a significant part in local or national history*

Grounds Romberg and Boyd played a significant role in the development of modern architecture in Australian over the last 60 years. Individually, each has made a distinctive and major contribution to Australian architecture. Frederick Romberg was one of the most significant architects working in Australia in the twentieth century and the Holy Trinity Finnish Lutheran Church is a major work in his career and a major work in Canberra. Frederick Romberg was awarded the RAIA (Victoria Chapter) President's Prize in 1983.

*(xi) a place which demonstrates a likelihood of providing information which will contribute significantly to a wider understanding of natural or cultural history, by virtue of its use as a research site, teaching site, type locality or benchmark site*

The architecture of the church may contribute to the education of designers in their understanding of the development of church architecture as well as their understanding of the development of late twentieth-century architectural styles.

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## References

- 1 Apperly, R. Irving. R. & Reynolds, P. 'A Pictorial Guide to Identifying Australian Architecture' Angus and Robertson Publishers, Sydney 1989.
- 2 Architect, November 1984 'Romberg Grounds and Boyd 1948-1959'.
- 3 Architecture Australia, vol. 82, no. 1, Jan/Feb 1993 'Obituary: Professor Frederick Romberg 1913-1992'.
- 4 Architecture in Australia, March 1962 'Lutheran National Memorial Church'.
- 5 Christ-Janer, A and Foley, M. 'Modern Church Architecture: A guide to the form and spirit of 20<sup>th</sup> century religious buildings', McGraw-Hill Book Company, NY, 1962.
- 6 Edquist, H. ed. 'Frederick Romberg: The Architecture of Migration 1938-1975', RMIT University Press, Melbourne, 2000.
- 7 Freeland, J. M. 'Architecture in Australia', Penguin Books Ltd, Victoria, 1968.
- 8 Garnett, R. & Hyndes, D. eds 'The Heritage of the Australian Capital Territory', 1992, ACT, National Trust of Australia (ACT); RAIA (ACT Chapter), Commonwealth of Australia.

- 9 Searle, G. 'Robin Boyd: A Life', Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1995.
  - 10 Tanner, H. ed. 'Architects of Australia', The Macmillan Company of Australia Pty Ltd, Melbourne, 1981.
  - 11 The Grove Dictionary of Art, Macmillan Publishers Limited, 2000.
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#### **Other Information Sources**

- 1 Australian Heritage Commission, Register of the National Estate File 8/1/0/463.
- 2 Conversation with Pastor Tuomo Montere, Holy Trinity Finnish Lutheran Church July 2001