Some of the achievements of Doctors Karl and Gertrude Langer – a presentation to the St Lucia History Group August 2004

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Some of the achievements of Doctors Karl and Gertrude Langer

Many of you are aware of this charming European couple as part of our community.

Karl was well described as a “Renaissance man” ie skilled in many disciplines. Gertrude was an art historian, lecturer, educator, writer and poet.

I think Karl was about 38 years of age when they arrived in Sydney in 1938. He took up an appointment as Town Planning consultant with the Cumberland County Council in that city. Shortly afterwards they travelled to Brisbane with Doctor Gaskins and his wife who became his first architectural client. A client who came to teach at the University of Queensland.

Karl was invited to give lectures in Town Planning to the Faculty of Engineering. His theories on town planning were published in his booklet Sub-tropical Housing.

Initially they chose to live in a flat on Coronation Drive, Toowong and commute to Sydney. During the Second World War he was employed by Queensland Rail where his duties included the design of the Sunlander and other trains, where the best features of luxury European expresses could be adapted to provide economical low cost transport through this vast state on our narrow gauge tracks.

Later he practiced as a private architect, lectured in the Faculty of Architecture at UQ and with Gertrude became a pivotal figure in the cultural life of our city. As I have time I will enlarge on:

- Their European achievements
- Why they came to our suburb
- Their community work
- The Town plans
- The economic dwelling
- Public buildings
- The role of the artist and art education

European achievements and traditions that they brought to St Lucia.

Karl was, no doubt aware of his Russian ancestry. He spoke of, as a boy, playing with toy soldiers. Growing up from 1903-20 he was aware of the works and ideas of the Viennese architect Otto Wagner (1841-1919) and his famous visitor from America, Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959), two pivotal figures in the “Modern Movement”.

Theatre, Music, Opera, Ballet and the visual and plastic arts were a vital part of their lives. Karl spoke of Chalaipin singing in the opera “Boris Godounov”. They both had a deep interest in health and the preservation of the natural environment.

I know that Gertrude’s studies in the Paris of Picasso, Chagal, Rodin, Gwen and Augustus John and others was a prelude to her doctoral degree in Vienna.

“Architecture” as a degree, was not offered by universities during this period. Karl told me of his associations with Josef Frank and Josef Hoffman (1870-1956) who were practicing architects teaching at the Technical College in Vienna where he sat with Richard Neutra.
Karl was influenced by the work of Peter Behrens (1868-1940) a pivotal figure in the world of architecture. Behrens employed a number of architects who would go on to become famous in their own right including Walter Gropius who formed the famous “Bauhaus” School, CE Jeanneret better known as “Le Corbusier” (1887-1965) and L Mies van der Rohe. Peter’s master class was the third core of modern architectural research.

Karl, and probably Gertrude, were actively involved in organisations concerned with “new design”, in particular the “Wiener Secession” and the “Deutscher Werkbund”. The latter was formed by Hermann Muthesius (1861-1927) who had studied the Art & Craft group in England and the work of Scottish architect Rennie Mackintosh (1868-1928). Later he lived in Japan and was impressed with the traditional houses with floor to ceiling sliding doors glazed with rice paper opening on to a formal garden. Karl told me that these ideas led to the basic shape of modern architecture.

Karl’s formal studies at the University of Vienna included science and engineering. Therefore in his design practice he was concerned with calculations, material stresses and cost. For example, should he use metal, ceramics, stone, earth, ceramic, plastic or timber?

Karl and Gertrude completed their Doctorates of Philosophy in the same year and married.

When he felt stressed Karl would go to the Vienna woods or, if time did not permit, to the aquarium. Both options caused him to be surrounded by the colour green. When he built Gertrude’s house in St Lucia he had the living room painted pale green.

Peter Behrens, in Berlin, appointed Karl to open a design office in Vienna. A theatre and a large steel and glass factory where major designs produced. After the rise of Hitler Karl and Gertrude moved to Le Corbusier’s studio in Paris. They were asked to visit a number of private houses the studio had designed.

Why did they come to St Lucia?

Initially this involved commuting to Sydney therefore they must have had compelling reasons and the following come to mind.

Firstly, they enjoyed the plants and the climate. Trees and birds singing on the slopes, led to an ideal domestic environment. Also a University was being built on a large site, like the suburb, with the river on three sides.

They also considered Brisbane, as a whole, was unspoiled and would grow to be a major city. The reason for this was our closeness by air, to America, Japan, East Asia and over the North Pole to Europe. Queensland had more arable land and probably mineral potential than other eastern states.

Dr Gaskin’s house and Karl’s small publication on Sub-tropical housing were also factors.

Arthur Groom, who spoke highly of them, and the Binna Burra Mountain lodge from which the environmental movement and Green party emerged, was relatively close by. On a final trip to this beautiful place Gertrude, by now a widow, died.

Work in the community
They were both “good Samaritans”. The words “Neighbour”, “Community” and “Post War Culture” come to mind. Karl shared the seats of his large automobile with many friends. They were enthusiastic subscribers to the Orchestra and live theatre.

Due to unsuccessful surgery Gertrude could not have children.

During the war in the 1940s Edgar Kaffman Junior, the millionaire owner of the famous Frank Lloyd house “Falling water” called on Karl. He was to build another house in the Arizona desert designed by Karl’s friend Richard Neutra, that had no stairs. Apparently his mother in law slipped on the hanging stairs from the pool below “Falling Water” and would not return there. Karl considered this to be an architectural achievement and was not impressed.

By way of contrast, Harry Seidler, who was also born in Vienna met Karl, as he put it, for “a week of monastic seclusion” at an architectural conference. “I enjoyed my time with your friend” Karl told me, I had called on Harry earlier in 1952 at his remarkable little studio under a block of apartments at Point Piper. I noticed his Harvard Master’s degree written in Latin on the wall. We spoke about Peter Behrens, Karl and the showroom-factory he had designed for me in Fortitude Valley. I visited his Sulman prize houses and we talked of many things including the power of the sun.

Gertrude was active in the “Council for the Encouragement of the Arts” that became the “Arts Council” she was asked to chair. This organization sent works of art and artists to branches all over our vast state. This group purchased a set of prints covering the work of leading world painters during the past 100 years. Karl and I organized framing and boxes so that these could be loaned to all Arts Council branches and to schools if they required them.

Karl was for a time president of the National Trust and for some years represented our state on the Arts Advisory Council that recommended assistance grants by the Federal Government. He was also active with road safety organizations.

Gertrude used to recruit members for the Art Gallery Society while traveling in the bus. They both served with me on the management committee for many years. Each was voted president for a period. When the Queensland Art Gallery was in the old museum we had lectures and demonstrations once every month. One evening we had “Artists in Action”. Karl sat on the floor drawing parts of trees while Daphne Mayo modeled the head of Prof Robinson in clay. The late Cath Shillum modeled cats from memory while her husband, Len, carved a wooden eagle. Betty Quelhurst painted a portrait in oils.

Gertrude gave many lectures in art history that Mary and I attended. For a number of years Gertrude, often with Karl’s assistance, conducted summer schools in the visual and plastic arts at the University of Queensland and Griffith University. Gertrude was appointed art critic for the Courier Mail. Her bright and incisive writing created both interest and, sometimes, savage response.

Fine art, as it was studied at the University of Vienna, was much more universal than that normally accepted in Brisbane at this time. The English and European school was only part. The art of China, Japan, South East Asia, Africa, India and the Muslim countries was studied with respect. For example in Muslim art the portrayal of living people was forbidden therefore they made a study of patterns. Art also included Architecture, ceramics, sculpture, painting, drawing, theatre and interior design. Gertrude was therefore able to understand the visual statements of non-objective painters as well as the Chinese and Japanese traditions.
She added to this background by interviewing artists in order to understand their aims and objectives. It is not surprising that patrons with more narrow views or with concern about the money value of art works might consider her views disturbing. In one specific instance an architectural commission was taken away from Karl by people offended by Gertrude’s writing.

Karl sent Mr Alexander, a Viennoise architect to see me. He had lived for many years in Thailand. He married a citizen of that country. He was forced to leave and brought his attractive wife to Brisbane. One afternoon Karl and I drove to his house. We then delivered to the Queensland Art Gallery a collection of art from South East Asia. This was the first of many larger activities of this kind that have made our gallery a leader in this field.

The town plans.

In his booklet “Subtropical housing” Karl makes it clear that town planning starts with respect for the environment. Le Corbusier, back in the 1920s, argued that modern reinforced concrete technology enabled even high-rise buildings to be lifted and spaced so that gardens, lawns and trees could “flow” unrestricted underneath. The attached illustrations show his moves toward this ideal.

Karl’s work for the Cumberland County Council in the city heart of Sydney aimed to preserve the green areas by, for example, placing a major car park under-ground with a conveyer belt to the city. His selection of the site for the Sydney Opera House led to the symbol locating this city throughout the world. A town plan has to accommodate hills and valleys as well as being understood by the people living there. This requires skilled individual negotiation by the architect and town planner on each project.

After Karl arrived in Queensland he studied statistics on average incomes, it became apparent that local people earned less than those in the southern states. He also noted the general preference for a small family house and garden. When we first met he told Mary and I that he considered three things should be considered before building a house. First “the heat of the sun” controlled by the aspect and correct roof overhangs or skylights. Second the wind, cool North East breezes or wild “Westerlies”! These can be controlled by ventilation. Lastly, convenience, to enable the objectives of the people inside to be achieved, effectively.

Using the principles of the “Rayburn” plan [Radburn ?], devised in America, he designed a town plan for a community of 2000 people. This included high-rise units, parking, school, shops etc. Figure 3 is a scaled down drawing of this plan.

When the wives of the public servants were required to move from Melbourne to Canberra they considered the quality of life in a new city. Apparently some of them had read Karl’s booklet. They wrote asking for him to apply his design to the rolling downs of Woden Valley. After considerable negotiation they had their way. And Karl was appointed. I met the daughter of one of these wives in David Jones store. She had enjoyed the convenience of having the walking areas and footpaths away from the roads “for vehicle use only”, around the edge.

In the cities of Mackay and Darwin his services were also used. His proposal for a Queen Street Mall was illustrated in the Courier Mail some ten years before his student Rob Gibson designed the first realized version.
Figure 1 One of the houses built by Le Corbusier that Karl and Gertrude visited in France. Long windows at eye height, ramps allowing wheel chair access or escape, wind protective screens and column and beam construction are apparent features. This or a similar house was built for a banker married to a ballet dancer who exercised on the roof. A sculpture shaped as a negative of her body allowed her to relax for her massage. Karl asked “what if the lady wishes to move ?”. Corbusier smiled. Karl realised that he spoke to a poet as well as a logical calculator.

Figure 2 This drawing of a high rise apartment building for Germany and a photo of the the base of the United Nations Building in New York by Le Corbusier illustrate the aim to allow space and, perhaps pools and gardens to flow under buildings.
Figure 3 Karl Langer concept plan for a community of 2,000. A key concept was the separation of vehicular and pedestrian traffic with an emphasis on walking to local services.

Figure 4 two examples of house plans from six included in *Sub-tropical Housing*.
It is important to note that Karl’s personal professional skill was required to make the Rayburn [Radburn?] principals work. There is a Thesis in the Architectural Library describing two instances, one in another part of Canberra and another in the Sydney suburb of Campbelltown, where the residents expressed dissatisfaction.

**The Economic house**

Figure 4 shows plans of two of the six houses from Karl’s booklet. You will notice that the people as well as furniture, stoves, washing machines etc are all drawn to scale. The irregular roof overhangs and the direction of the sun and winds is also clearly shown. Careful placement of this equipment and the compact layout of the bedrooms allow generous space in the public areas of the home. These homes are all within the 1,000 square feet maximum allowed during the early post war period.

Karl was always aware of the power of positive and negative space. The shape of the area that is empty, that is “negative”, areas where people could move and the pleasing winds could blow was always important to him. Space under chairs allowed easy cleaning, open cane or wire on seats and backs allowed the body to breathe and space could flow through. Karl’s friends Frank and Hoffman designed such chairs for the Thonet Company in Europe, specialists in bentwood furniture.

Army huts of various types were available. Karl used and adapted these on several projects. One using the vertical siding popular in America rather than weatherboards was used on St Peter’s campus. For an old lady in Hamilton he joined three standard short huts then fitted french glass doors for the living dining area and hopper Whitco openings for kitchen bath and bedroom. On the long back wall facing west he fitted two blade glass louvers for through ventilation.

His first house, Dr Gaskin’s, at 169 Hawken Drive uses hedges to make private outdoor rooms. Originally it was painted grey with white circular columns about 8cm in diameter. These neutral colours contrast well with the blue of the sky and green of the trees.

Gertrude’s pink house at 396 Swann Road is quite different. The cavity brick structure with hooded windows facing south has three storeys. The bedrooms on top open onto a flat roof terrace above the lounge dining room, kitchen and entry hall. The lower floor was their studio opening onto his private rain forest, lily pond, palms and blue gum trees. From the street the entry path is flanked by a high wall and the garage. The large glass openings from the dining room and kitchen opening on to a pool and garden are thus private and protected from the winds. This house has been described as “an ugly pink blot on the street”. This opinion, no doubt, stems from the fact that it differs in both appearance and concept from the other houses in the street. I think this house “makes sense” and is beautiful. The colour, pink, blends well with the cream and greens of the bushes and large tree. The fact that, like a castle, the roof cannot be seen is to me to be different but distinguished and, perhaps, better.

His last house at the corner of Tarcoola Street and Hillside Terrace for his friends the Williamsons, demonstrates a creative solution to a difficult site. The garage opens to a guest bedroom and internal stairway. The upper floor accommodates a living-dining room with a view over to the golf links, kitchen, family room and main bedroom. The latter open onto a pool set in the terraced hillside. All the public rooms in the “U” shaped plan open on to a spacious terrace on the roof of the garage. Here a wider view of the river and links can be enjoyed.

These are but three examples from a number of remarkable dwellings he had designed.
Figure 5 ‘Gertrude’s’ house in Swann Road (dining chairs Le Corbusier design made by Thonet) and bottom the Williamson’s house on the corner of Tarcoola Street and Hillside Terrace (both St Lucia)
Public buildings.

St Peter’s Lutheran college facing Lambert Road Indooroopilly provided 55 acres of campus to him to use the principles of town planning. The main buildings surround an assembly area on the central ridge. On one side was open area forest and the other was developed as rainforest.

The twin chapels, “redemption” and “contemplation” and the soaring bell tower with neon illuminated cross face the quadrangle. This building is a work of art. The broad two story white marble and glass façade lights the interior sloping nave. Beyond the pews and the large sandstone altar a row of green plants conceal the lighting of the white ceiling that seems to flow up and back to infinity.

At the back above the nave is a large choir gallery and organ. It will comfortably accommodate about one quarter of the present enrolment of 1,600. Under the bell tower is the small contemplative chapel for from one to ten people. It is lit by small slit windows glazed with a special orange bubble glass Karl had some trouble locating. The carved figure of Christ on the cross is very moving in the manner of the ancient German carvings (refer Figure 6)

The dining hall and kitchen, to the right, is, by contrast, a light grey corrugated steel shelter with glass walls on two sides. From the quadrangle one can see right through. I was on the staff of this school for 2 years and found this place a delightful place to dine.

The administrative building next door is of brick. The end blank wall had protruding bricks that made an interesting shadow pattern. The health and safety authorities have since insisted they be chipped back as they feared some student may climb up the wall. No such effort has been recorded. I fear this could have been “overkill”.

The library at the far end has a white concrete and glass façade blending with the white marble in the chapel. On the left side a balustrade protects a drop of over two meters. This retaining wall-cliff concealed the parked cars of some of the staff. A bridge leads to the two storey science block.

The school made a bold move during the 1940s to offer a co-ed boarding school. Students come from the islands north of Australia and from country districts.

Behind the chapel is the boy’s dormitory. The girls are accommodated on the far side beyond the library. I first experienced the chapel during Karl’s funeral in 1968. The voices of 100 school children floating above us singing “nearer my God to thee” still haunt me.

Since then the school has expanded and a number of changes have been made. It now becomes apparent that on this campus as, in fact in all of his work, each building serves to fit the perceived functional requirements of the client and the clients clients.

Many of Karl’s buildings are quite different in appearance. The Department of Main Roads building in Boundary Street is an example of his work on a high-rise building. The client’s brief did not permit gardens and lawns to flow underneath, however, the trees and space flow around the entrance is very friendly. The large windows are reversible, they can be completely cleaned from the inside. The staff dining and recreation area on the top floor are also very attractive. I believe that it stands out as a beautiful building.
Figure 6 St Peter’s School Chapel, Lambert Road, Indooroopilly
Renovations to “Lennons”, our leading hotel at the time, and the design of two new accommodation buildings for this group were major undertakings in the 1960’s. Unfortunately only the one in Toowoomba, now called “McCaffeties” has survived. I found the design of the bedrooms very convenient, i.e., the functions of resting, bathing and writing were well catered for when I stayed there.

In both this hotel and that at Broad Beach he used Leonard Shillum’s large granite Seal and Penguin in the pool and garden area. Around the Broad Beach building, the gardens included Australian Aboriginal sculptural works and water washed stonework.

During 1951 it was the privilege of Mary and I to work with Karl on our furniture showroom and factory at 618 Wickham Street, Fortitude Valley. The enclosed drawings show how we moved the existing buildings to the rear of the site. They needed to be lifted on columns so that the upper floor could load goods to the rear street. We then had a woodwork shop at ground level with polishing and inventory storage on the upper floor. (Refer Figure 7)

Karl’s design for the showroom was remarkably effective and economic. He used “curtain wall” theory. The deep timber truss ventilated ceiling that kept the building cool and the steel membrane accessible roof were completely supported by twelve columns and one stone pier. The single skin brick walls and parapet sealed the space and provided fire protection.

Karl used seven inch (17.78cm) diameter wooden columns on the Gaskin house and seven inch steel pipe on my father’s house but here he chose four inch (10cm) square hardwood with half inch (1cm) radius corners. We processed these in our own workshop. They stood one inch (2.5cm) above the floor supported by a one inch diameter solid steel rod set into the base of the column. There was a steel collar below the base and a plate and fork one and a half inches below the concrete floor. He also used these on our carport at 88 Brisbane Corso, Fairfield. The pools were two inches (5cm) deep with twelve inch deep holes for water lilies. The balanced ecology of native fish and water plates mostly found their own food.

The transparent walls for viewing furniture without entering the shop were of plate glass. The sheets rested on rubber faced mounds one inch (2.5cm) below the surface of the water and were slotted into the ceiling. Small clips and mastic joined them. On the street façade the glass was sloped back 30 degrees. These sheets required the extra support of mullions fitted behind the joins. From passing cars or trams and from the footpath the glass virtually disappeared due to the dark reflection from the awning. However walking across the street the reflection of the sky would appear and fade out when the footpath was reached. Karl originally had the glass reflecting the footpath. However we agreed that the drama of the final solution was preferable.

The 3 skylights directed to the front pool created no heat problem. However, Harry Seidler questioned the long one lighting the floor in front of the sidewall. Fortunately the air movement in the large space above the curved plaster ceiling kept the showroom cool. The roof with its painted mural was used to display outdoor furniture as well as some assembly operations.

The showroom became a regular stop for the tourist bus. It was featured in the Sunday Mail Magazine and in 1952 I was told it stopped the Royal entourage for a few minutes.
Figure 7 Karl Langer’s concept drawings for the West Furniture Store and Factory, Fortitude Valley. Existing building relocation (top) and new showroom layout including fish ponds
In 1956 I accepted the Australian license to manufacture the Knoll International collection of furniture. This group related back to the Walter Gropius Bauhaus and aimed to offer the finest equipment for the “New Architecture”. I became number 18 in a world Knoll family. (refer Figure 8).

At the time Licensing restricted imports to a few samples. We now had a product worthy of this design, were able to organize a large group of skilled sub-contractors to make parts and developed some skills not previously achieved in Australia. We had clients and distributors in all mainland states. This involved a large investment in tooling and development cost. We hoped these would be written off over a number of years. Large projects, of course, helped this objective.

Unfortunately with the two that came our way we were cheated. First Karl required several hundred chairs designed by his friends Frank and Hoffman. Components had to be imported from Europe. The Czech trade commissioner put the case to the Federal Government. “We have a famine and wish to pay for your wheat with chair parts”. Eventually the Assistant to the Minister of Trade asked to see me. “I have been waiting to meet you, Jim Killen keeps tapping me on the shoulder saying what about my friend West”. He was, obviously, embarrassed when he added “I know you will consider that this does not make sense but our policy is multinational and we cannot consider bilateral agreements. For example look at how unfairly we treat France”

Arguments such as revenue from our tourist industry or our international image would not be considered.

Later when I met this gentleman and a number of his cabinet colleagues at breakfast in the CTA club in Melbourne I was surprised how helpful they tried to be.

I now call the years to 1963 “our road to Calvary”. In that year the Knoll Companies were taken over by Art Metal of New Jersey, import licensing was abolished over night and a new building in Melbourne required a very large quantity of Knoll Furniture. My Victorian distributor, Max Hutchenson, warned me about a group that I would for convenience call “The Melbourne Mafia”. These people went to America and (I believe) through deception, obtained my license, completed the large order with imported products, inflated the prices and eventually became bankrupt.

My father felt he had no alternative but to sell the property to a group who would destroy the pools and take out the glass. The present owner finds the cool space and skylights useful for selling and repairing used refrigerators.

**The role of the artist & Art Education**

Gertrude often said that the first role of the artist was to be critically aware. The second was to share his “vision” with others by creating “Works of Art”. To this end she would visit festivals such as that held regularly in Adelaide. She interviewed artists in their studios, attended theatres, viewed films and travelled to exhibitions in many parts of Australia. At her annual two week Summer Schools she employed practicing artists.

Karl not only taught & employed students but made gifts of books and furniture to the University of Queensland.
Figure 8 Knoll advertising material (clockwise from top left, Brisbane on the map, Andre Doppet string chair, wire chairs designed by Harry Bertoia)
When Karl and Gertrude came to Brisbane students in architecture worked for and were taught by practicing architects. Now both UQ and QUT offer degree courses in Architecture, Town Planning and Landscape design.

Karl did not wish to be a fulltime academic. However, I believe he supported these developments. He kept abreast with the evolution of town planning internationally by maintaining contact with his overseas colleagues. His fifth year lectures in this discipline at the University of Queensland became legendary. These continued until he died.

For the reasons that I have outlined I believe that we, in Australia, have good cause to be grateful to this remarkable couple.

Before she died, Gertrude established a trust to sponsor an annual Karl Langer memorial lecture. One of the most entertaining of these was given by Harry Seidler. Using a wide screen format he traced their parallel careers.

[Following pages - Example of Karl Langer’s work in regional Queensland – photographs of St John’s Lutheran Church exterior, Bundaberg (Andrew D 2014)]