

Quotations in the Architect's Sketchbook

Analysing Nell McCredie's Sketchbooks

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Abstract

In the sketchbooks of Australian interwar architect Nell McCredie, details of some of the various influences on her work can be inferred from the quotations found in her sketchbooks. These quotations take the form of hand written verbatim text, including a quote from John Ruskin's essay "Traffic", and his lecture, "Life without Industry is Guilt and Industry without Art is Brutality". McCredie also transcribed quotes from literary journals such as The London. Her sketchbooks also uncover the use of the journal Architect and Engineer (San Francisco) by students at the University of Sydney. The quotations also take the form of images and drawings, including floor plans and photographs of houses cut and paste from journals. The findings from the research contribute to an understanding of what architecture students, practitioners and teaching staff were reading to inform their studies and practice in the 1920s.

Introduction

Nell McCredie was part of the first cohort of architects to train in the University of Sydney's Bachelor of Architecture programme between 1918 and 1923. McCredie went on to practice as an architect in Sydney (1918 – 1924), Cairns (1925), Brisbane (1925 – 1932) and then returned to Sydney to practice as both a ceramist and architect. In the archive of McCredie's work, maintained privately by her family, there were four sketchbooks discovered. Two were from her student days (1918 – 1923), one that she used during her time working as an architect in Cairns, Brisbane and Sydney as well as some of her ceramics design (1925 – 1930s), and one that documents her work as a ceramicist (1930s onward). This paper analyses quotations from various sources that were found in her sketchbooks. The majority of the quotations were found in the two student sketchbooks and they reveal much about the literature that the first students of architecture at the University of Sydney were reading. They also add to the existing literature that describes Professor Leslie Wilkinson's approach to teaching architecture through the analysis of archival material.

Under Wilkinson's teaching, students were encouraged to pursue knowledge in the arts, culture and aesthetics and not to focus entirely on the technical aspects of architecture.¹ As a result, McCredie engaged with various texts on architecture and the arts throughout her studies: the works of John Ruskin in particular, are especially evident in her thesis, *The Aesthetic Improvement of our Environment*². Her endeavours in reading about architecture meant that she became adept at writing about design, especially town planning. In 1925 she had an article published in *The Architectural and Building Journal of Queensland* titled, "A Model Suburb".³ She was also later quoted in the Sydney Morning Herald with her views on residential architecture.⁴ Graduates of the first architecture degree in Australia were equipped with more than the technical skills of architects; this paper argues that Wilkinson's students were taught to be critical thinkers with enough knowledge in architectural history to articulate a point of view on matters concerning the built environment.

Through the quotations found in McCredie's sketchbooks there are two interesting findings that will be discussed in this paper. The first is her reading of John Ruskin's work throughout her studies, and how this influenced her final year thesis. There is limited existing discussion on architects engaging with Ruskin's in the interwar period. And secondly, the paper discusses the influence of American journals on students at the University of Sydney, one in particular, titled, *The Architect and Engineer* and how this publication influenced McCredie's work later in her career as a practising architect.

Background: What Were Architecture Students Reading In The 1920s?

In 1984 Peter Proudfoot wrote an article titled, "The development of architectural education in Sydney, 1880–1930".⁵ In that article he wrote about the failure for students and lecturers to engage with important architectural debates taking place at the turn of the 19th century, Proudfoot argued that this failure to connect Australian architecture to bigger international movements in architecture, in particular modernism, was due to a preoccupation with the development of a national style, but he also suggested that it was due to a lack of critical architectural publications and that Australia was left out of these important discussions,

The arrival of Leslie Wilkinson at the University of Sydney in 1918 to establish Australia's first bachelor of architecture degree helped develop new sensibilities in the public discourse of Australian Architecture in the early 20th century.⁶ Charged with the developing the first full qualification in architecture in Australia, Wilkinson intentionally turned away from the industrially focused curriculum provided by the existing technical colleges in Australia.⁷ Instead, Wilkinson emphasized the importance of students learning to be analytical, to engage in intelligent and critical debates on design and to understand aesthetic sensibilities in architecture.⁸ While there were books to support his emphasis on a critical understanding of architecture, there were limited local publications, especially topical journals that published relevant material. As Proudfoot wrote:

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“The difficulty for enterprising students of architecture in pursuing an education in a complex discipline was that the few journals available favoured descriptive material by practitioners. They did not, to any extent, carry material of an analytical nature, especially about Australian architecture and there was no journal or vehicle to engender formal communication between practitioners, educators and students”.⁹

Australian authors who created good quality, critical and analytical writing on local architecture would seek to have the published in journals overseas, such as the *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*. These journals were expensive and difficult for students to access. The students were generally discouraged from reading the local trade magazines and architectural publications that offered little critique of architecture and illustrations that were lacking details, such as technical drawings.¹⁰

There was of course Florence and George Taylor's *Building Journal*, which was first published in 1907 until it was re-named *Building and Engineering* in 1942. This was an influential Australian journal of its time that many students and practitioners would have engaged with. However, it's possible that students at the University of Sydney would have been discouraged from reading this journal due to a dispute between Leslie Wilkinson and Hardy Wilson with the Taylors. In Robert Freestone and Nicola Pullan's article on the development of the architecture degree at the University of Sydney, they detail the disagreement as arising out of the Taylors publishing notes from one of Wilkinson's lectures without his permission.¹¹ In Bronwyn Hanna's thesis on Sydney's early women architects, she cites Richard Apperley's 1972 thesis, saying that the dispute was the result of the Taylors criticising Wilkinson and Wilson in an issue of *Building*.¹² For either both or one of these reasons, it is unlikely that the architecture students at the University of Sydney were encouraged to read *Building* throughout their studies.

An interesting finding from an analysis of McCredie's sketchbooks was that she often referenced the American journal *Architect and Engineer*. Another American journal read by architecture students at the University of Sydney was *Pencil Points: A Journal for the Drafting Room*. In Bronwyn Hanna's thesis, she discusses influences on Eleanor Cullis-Hill's work, a graduate from 1937. Cullis-Hill credits *Pencil Points*, more so than Leslie Wilkinson's teaching, as a significant influence on her work.¹³ The University of Sydney subscribed to this journal from 1921 up until 1942. In George Hatman's anthology on the journal, he writes that *Pencil Points* was instrumental in establishing a new architectural discourse in the interwar period, he wrote that,

“It also established the agenda in architectural theory: multivolume pieces by John Harbeson, Talbot Hamlin, Hugh Ferriss, and others dealt with major issues that are still relevant today-architectural education and practice, small-house design and portable housing, city planning, and the influence (or not) of modernism”¹⁴

The American journals filled the critical and theoretical discursive gap that was left by Australian architectural magazines and publications. Considering the critical agenda set by Wilkinson in establishing the new degree in architecture, finding publications that supported this new programme was important.¹⁵

In Proudfoot's article, he goes on to criticise the Australian publications that were available, writing that they tended to promote “vernacular” styles of architecture that were, for the most part, discouraged by teaching staff in the early years of the Bachelor of Architecture being taught at the University of Sydney. Proudfoot wrote that:

The Californian Bungalow style in particular flourished through publication in popular journals such as the *Australian Real Property Annual* (1910-1921), and *Australian Home*

Builder (1922-1924). There were other magazines and popular journals promoting so-called vernacular styles, for example, the *Australian Home Beautiful* (1925-); *The Home* (1929-1940); *Building and Real Estate* (1912-1916); *Building* (1916-); *For Every Man This Home* (1922) and *Construction Review* (1922).¹⁶

McCredie's graduate thesis, *The Aesthetic Improvement of our Environment*¹⁷ was especially critical of the emergence of the Australian bungalow, describing "the speculating builders who are responsible for most of these seem to vie with one another in an attempt to produce the most flagrantly ugly erection".¹⁸ McCredie's thesis also made several references to Ruskin's work and the reading of Ruskin's work at the University of Sydney in the 1920s requires further investigation.

At the turn of the 19th century, John Ruskin's work informed a sense of nationalism and was often cited in discussions around the establishment of a distinctly Australian style of architecture.¹⁹ In Mark Stiles thesis, *Reading Ruskin: Architecture And Social Reform In Australia, 1889–1908* (2010), he writes that by 1908, John Ruskin's influence was waning in architectural practice.²⁰ Ruskin is rarely mentioned in any of the texts on the developments of Wilkinson's bachelor of architecture degree at the University of Sydney. However, McCredie makes a few references to Ruskin in her sketchbooks and her thesis was described as Ruskinesque by heritage architect Richard Allom.²¹ Another early graduate from the University of Sydney, Rosina Edmonds, also had her work described as Ruskinesque in Bronwyn Hanna's thesis.²² Edmonds graduated one year after McCredie in 1924 and wrote a book titled, "Architecture—and introductory survey". It was published in 1938 and it aimed to make architecture accessible to a broad audience.²³ McCredie was not alone then in reading Ruskin's work throughout her studies in architecture.

Quotations in McCredie's Sketchbooks

One of the most apparent influences on McCredie's studies was John Ruskin's work. Her final year thesis, *The Aesthetic Improvement of our Environment* heavily references Ruskin's work as she argues for greater care in the appearance of all aspects of the city from housing to street lamps and signage.²⁴ In her sketchbooks she included two Ruskin quotes. The first is found in one of her student sketchbooks (circa DATE) and the second in the later book dedicated to (circa 1930) sometime during the 1930s. The first being is from Ruskin's 1888 essay *Traffic*: "All good architecture is the expression of national life and character and is produced by a prevalent and eager national taste or desire for beauty – Ruskin", as shown in figure one; a quote from Ruskin's 1866 essay, *Traffic*.²⁵ The quote concerned with a national identity or "taste" for architecture would have been prevalent in discussions concerned with nationalist ideologies that called for the development of a distinctly Australian style of architecture at the turn of the 19th century.²⁶ Any emphasis placed on reading Ruskin as part of an architectural education at University of Sydney was likely introduced by architects such as John Sulman, who taught at the University between 1887 and 1912.²⁷

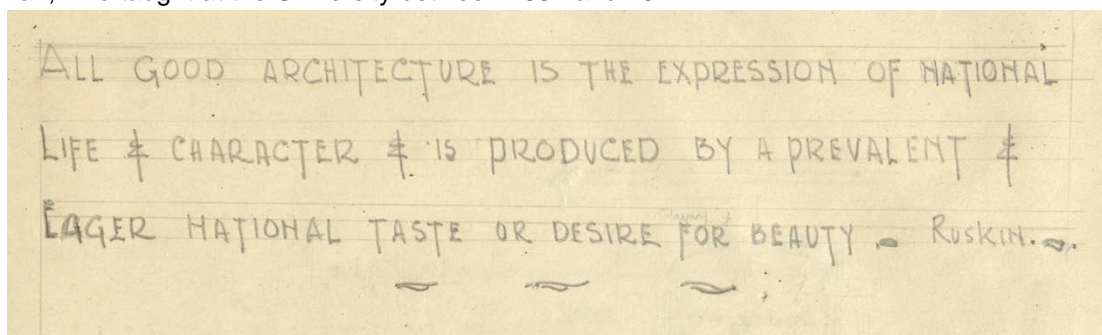


Figure 1. Ruskin quote written out by McCredie in her student sketchbook

The second Ruskin quote, shown in figure two, is the title of Ruskin's 1870 lecture, "Life without Industry is Guilt and Industry without Art is Brutality".²⁸ The quote is surrounded by a series of

sketches for ornamentation and ceramic carafes. Underneath the Ruskin quote McCredie has quoted William Shakespeare's comedy, *Taming of the Shrew*, from Act One Scene One of, "No Profit Grows where there is no pleasure taken".²⁹ Here, she appears to be synthesising the meaning between these the two quotes, that for objects or commodities to be of value, there must be some pleasure derived from the maker's creative endeavours. It should be noted that these two Ruskin quotes are presented very differently to other quotes in the sketchbooks. It's possible that these quotes were part of drafting exercises or copied from motifs. However, given that McCredie referenced Ruskin in her thesis, his writing had some influence over her work. At the top of the page are the details for the book, *Drawing and Design for Craftsmen* by Robert Stuart Bowers.³⁰ The book was originally published in 1916. It would appear that McCredie engaged with Ruskin's work throughout her career as both an architect and ceramist.

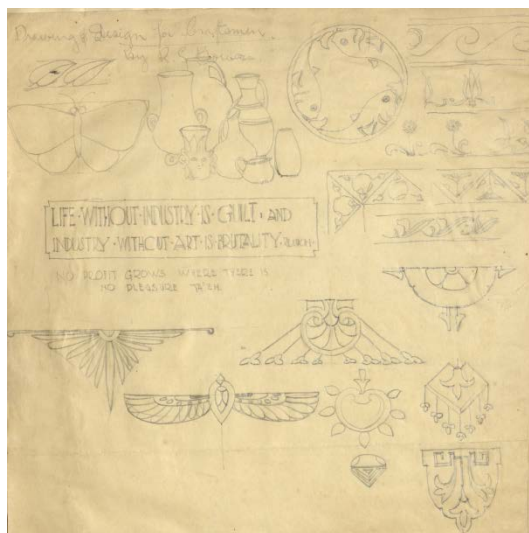


Figure 2. Ruskin Quote, followed by Shakespeare quote from McCredie's student sketchbooks. Writing at the top of the page is a reference to the book *Drawing and Design for Craftsmen* by Robert Stuart Bowers (first published in 1916)

Another interesting quotation cited in McCredie's student sketchbooks came from the journal, *The London* also known as the *Gentleman's monthly intelligencer*. This journal was published from 1732 until 1930, and the University of Sydney library has a substantial collection of this journal. From issue of *The London*, McCredie quotes an article titled, "The Architect". (Figure 3) The quotation reads:

"A practical Man is one who has insight into character and who knows whom to avoid and whom to trust; one who is neither very cautious nor very rash but who chooses a happy medium".³¹

This excerpt McCredie selected from the article articulates the importance of architects being perceived as practical and the character required for a man to practice architecture. The significance of this quotation is it demonstrates a questioning or attempt to understand the role of the architect and broader society.³² The professionalization of architects was central to the development of the architecture course and the appointment of the chair, Leslie Wilkinson.³³ It McCredie is looking at literature on architecture outside of the industry journals available in Australia. That architecture is not just a technical or building pursuit, but that architects make complex negotiations as part of the design process. This would have been influenced by Wilkinson's emphasis on architecture being more than just a technical pursuit. This quote might appear to contradict Wilkinson's sentiments, however, he still impressed upon the students that architecture should be understood and accessible to everyone.³⁴

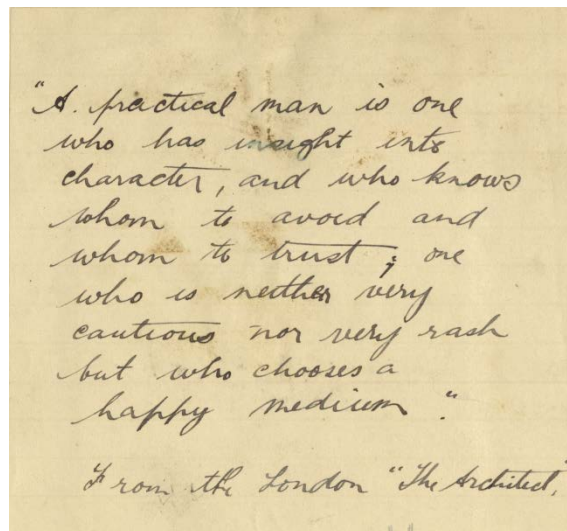


Figure 3. Quote in McCredie's sketchbook from an article titled, "The Architect" from the *London Magazine*

Other Quotations in McCredie's journal included short statements by Robert Louis Stevenson, "The world is full of a number of things, I'm sure we should all be as happy as Kings". Which is from the poem published in *A Child's Garden of Verses* in 1885. There are also quotes from Ecclesiastics 44:9 in King James Bible. These quotations tell us much about McCredie's personal life and upbringing, but are not explicitly related to her education as an architect. There are also images that have been cut out and pasted into her sketchbooks from publications such as *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *Building Journal*, and *The Architectural and Building Journal Queensland*. There are some images that have been pasted in from publications that haven't yet been identified. The fact that these images have been cut out and pasted suggests that McCredie purchased these publications for herself, or they were given to her. The one publication that she didn't cut out and paste was an American Journal titled, *Architect and Engineer*, instead she copied the floor plans published in this journal by drawing them (as seen in Figure 5). The *Architect and Engineer* is a publication that she referenced regularly.

Architect and Engineer



Figure 4. Scanned Front cover of the *Architect and Engineer* October 1921 issue.

Starting in 1921 the University of Sydney subscribed to the *Architect and Engineer* Journal. The journal was first published in San Francisco in 1903, with the last known issue published in 1958.³⁵ It

was an industry journal, with large portions of the magazine given over to product advertisement and news from professional associations. The journal also featured articles on houses with substantial critical essays accompanied by images of the buildings and floor plans. Considering the university commenced ordering the *Architect and Engineer* a short time after Wilkinson commenced his position at the university, it's likely that he requested that the journal be ordered. However, Wilkinson did work with an American architect, R. Keith Harris, on a number of buildings and it's possible that Harris introduced Wilkinson to the magazine.³⁶

The scope of the journal was broad to cater to the interests of both architects and engineers. One piece written by a Chicago bureaucrat, Mayo Fesler, was published in the October 1921 issue of the magazine.³⁷ McCredie copied the piece in its entirety in her sketchbook:

"The Ideal City

A city, sanitary, convenient, substantial;

Where the houses of the rich and the poor are alike; comfortable and beautiful;

Where the streets are clean and the skyline is clear as country air;

Where the architectural excellence of its buildings adds beauty and dignity to the streets;

Where the parks and the playgrounds are within reach of every child;

Where living is pleasant, toil honourable, and recreation plentiful;

Where capital is respected and not worshipped;

Where Commerce in goods is great but not greater than the interchange of ideas;

Where industry thrives, and brings prosperity alike to employer and employed;

Where education and art have a place in every home;

Where worth and not wealth give standing to me;

Where the power of character lifts men to leadership;

Where interest in public affairs is a test of citizenship and devotion to the public weal is a badge of honour;

Where government is always honest and efficient and the principles of democracy find their fullest and truest expression;

Where the people of all the earth can come and be blended into one community life, and where each generation will vie with the past to transmit to the next a city greater, better and more beautiful than the last".³⁸

McCredie's interest in Fesler's article above demonstrates her interest in discussions around citizenship and amenity in thinking about the city. The integration of town planning studies within the bachelor of architecture would have seen students encouraged to engage in intellectual discourse on concepts surrounding and informing architecture by Wilkinson.³⁹

A different method of quotation that McCredie employed in her sketchbooks was to copy floor plans from the *Architect and Engineer*. One example of this is the floor plan of a house (Figure 4) featured on page 78 in the same issue, October 1921. The house appears to be influenced by Spanish architecture, an approach to design encouraged by Wilkinson, with a courtyard at the centre of the house. The house was built in Piedmont, California and designed by B. Sidney & Noble Newsom, Architects. It is a large house in comparison to the scale of housing that McCredie worked on later in her career. However, the use of fixed joinery for a table and seating in a small nook next to the kitchen was replicated in the design McCredie completed for a house in Brisbane in 1928.

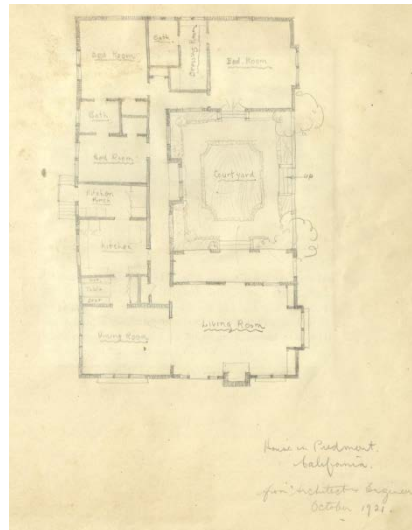


Figure 5. A copy of a floor plan from *Architect and Engineer* from October 1921 issue found copied in McCredie's Sketchbook.

In 1928 McCredie designed a house as a private commission for the Jack family in the Brisbane suburb of Wilston. The house was added to the heritage register in 2000 and a significant justification for listing the house was for its thoughtful interior planning. Specifically mentioned in the citation was that the house included a laundry chute and a breakfast nook.⁴⁰ There is a clear correlation between the floor plan of the house she copied from *Architect and Engineer* as a student in 1921 and the breakfast nook she designed for Uanda House as an architect in 1928.

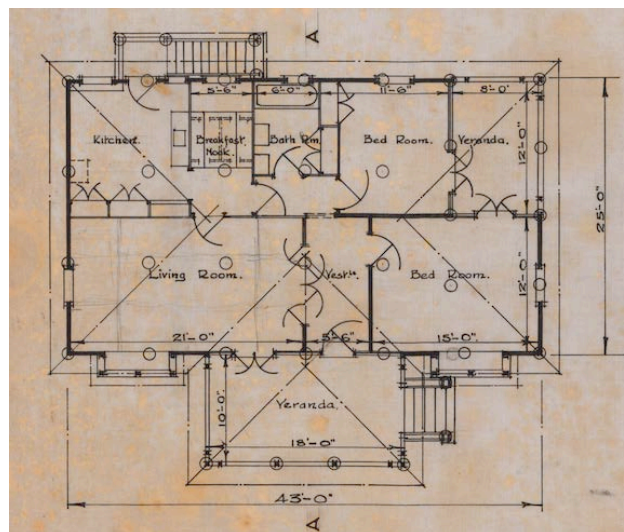


Figure 6. Floor plan of McCredie's 1928 house, Uanda. The house included a Breakfast Nook, which is similar to a floor plan that McCredie copied from *Architect and Engineer* in 1921. Image of floor plan from Architect's archive, reproduced with permission from McCredie's family.

Conclusion

While Proudfoot's summary of the literature available in Australia is thorough, there were journals and magazines, such as the *Engineer and Architect* and *Pencil Points* available to students that have been overlooked. Through analysing the quotations in McCredie's sketchbook, the sources of literature available to early students of architecture at the University of Sydney could be identified. It

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also identifies that students looked to literature outside of the discipline of architecture to understand the city and the role of the architect in society.

Another insight that the quotations in McCredie's sketchbooks reveal is that despite Wilkinson's emphasis on the Mediterranean and "simplicity" in buildings, students were still referring to the work of John Ruskin and that the English craft tradition remained an undercurrent at the school.⁴¹ In Proudfoot's work he implies that references to Ruskin in the teaching at the University of Sydney was likely inherited from earlier teaching staff, in particular John Sulman.⁴² However, it is evident that at least up until the 1920s, students, including McCredie and Rosina Edmonds, were still reading John Ruskin's work. The most important contribution that a reading of the quotations in McCredie's sketchbooks makes is that Wilkinson was training architects to be critical thinkers. He was not solely focused on teaching students about the technical aspects of architecture. He was encouraging them to engage with social cultural ideas about the city and buildings and to develop an understanding of the history of architecture. Students such as McCredie readily engaged in intellectual debates and critical discussion in architecture. This is evidenced not only in her sketchbooks, but also through McCredie's capacity to write and speak about architecture after the completion of her degree in architecture at the University of Sydney.

Endnotes

- ¹ P.R. Proudfoot, "The Development of Architectural Education in Sydney, 1880–1930", *Historical Studies*. 1984. 21:83, 197-211, DOI: 10.1080/10314618408595701
- ² Nell McCredie, *The Aesthetic Improvement of our Environment*, Student Architectural thesis, University of Sydney: 1923
- ³ Nell McCredie, "A Model Suburb", *The Architectural and Building Journal of Queensland*, June (1925):25
- ⁴ "Sydney Women Who Design Homes Give Advice to Home Builders. "Don't Indulge in Momentary Fads", in *The Sydney Morning Herald* 16th November (1937):15
- ⁵ Proudfoot, *Development of Architectural Education*, 201.
- ⁶ Conrad Hamann, "Nationalism and Reform In Australian Architecture 1880–1920", *Australian Historical Studies* 18, no. 72 (1979): 393-411
- ⁷ Freestone, Robert, and Nicola Pullan, "From Wilkinson to Winston: Towards a Planning Degree at the University of Sydney 1919-1949". In *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand: 32, Architecture, Institutions and Change*, edited by Paul Hogben and Judith O'Callaghan, 157-169. Sydney: SAHANZ, 2015.
- ⁸ Wilkinson, D., P. Johnson, and G. Molnar, "Leslie Wilkinson, A Practical Idealist", Valadon, Sydney: 1982.
- ⁹ Proudfoot, *Development of Architectural Education*, 209
- ¹⁰ Proudfoot, *Development of Architectural Education*, 209
- ¹¹ Citing Robert Freestone and Bronwyn Hanna's book, Robert Freestone and Bronwyn Hanna, *Florence Taylor's Hats* (Sydney: Halstead Press, 2008), 135-136 in their paper, Freestone, Robert, and Nicola Pullan. "From Wilkinson to Winston: Towards a Planning Degree at the University of Sydney 1919-1949", 159.
- ¹² In Bronwyn Hanna, *Absence and Presence: A Historiography of Early Women Architects In New South Wales*, (University of New South Wales, 1999). She cites Richard Appleby's 1972 architecture thesis.
- ¹³ Hanna, *Absence and Presence*, 259
- ¹⁴ Hartman, George E., and Jan Cigliano, *Pencil Points Reader: Selected Readings from a Journal for the Drafting Room, 1920-1943*, (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004).
- ¹⁵ Freestone and Pullan, *From Wilkinson to Winston*
- ¹⁶ Proudfoot, *Development of Architectural Education*, 207.
- ¹⁷ McCredie, *The Aesthetic Improvement of Our Environment*
- ¹⁸ McCredie, *The Aesthetic Improvement of Our Environment*, 12
- ¹⁹ Hamann, *Nationalism and Reform*, 301
- ²⁰ Mark Stiles, *Reading Ruskin: Architecture and Social Reform in Australia, 1889–1908*, PhD Thesis, University of New South Wales, 2010. P.156
- ²¹ Richard Allom transcribed expert witness statement from Michel v. Brisbane City Council court case (environment and land court) 1999.
- ²² Hanna, *Absence and Presence*, 155
- ²³ Both McCredie and Edmonds appear in an article about designing houses, "Sydney Women Who Design Homes Give Advice to Home Builders, "Don't Indulge in Momentary Fads", in *The Sydney Morning Herald* 16th November (1937):15
- ²⁴ McCredie, *The Aesthetic Improvement of Our Environment*.
- ²⁵ John Ruskin, *Unto This Last and Other Essays on Political Economy*. Accessed via Project Gutenberg <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/36541/36541-h/36541-h.htm>
- ²⁶ Hamann, *Nationalism and Reform*, 302.
- ²⁷ Proudfoot, *Development of Architectural Education*", 211
- ²⁸ Ruskin. *Unto This Last*.
- ²⁹ Shakespeare, William, *The Taming of the Shrew* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
- ³⁰ Robert Bowers, *Drawing and Design for Craftsmen* McKay, London: 1929.
- ³¹ Transcribed from McCredie's journal, a quote from London Magazine, "The Architect", date unknown.
- ³² Deborah van der Plaats, "'Architectural Ignorance and Public Indifference:' Harold Desbrowe-Annear's Lecture on 'Some Methods of Architectural Criticism,'" *Fabrications, The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians of Australia and New Zealand*, 19:1 (2009):170.
- ³³ Freestone and Pullan, *From Wilkinson to Winston* 168
- ³⁴ Hamann, *Nationalism and Reform*,

³⁵ *Architect and Engineer*, accessed via InternetArchive.org, <https://archive.org/search.php?query=publisher%3A%22San+Francisco+%3A+Architect+and+Engineer%2C+Inc%22&page=2>

³⁶ Proudfoot, *Development of Architectural Education*

³⁷ Mayo Fesler, "The Ideal City", *Architect and Engineer*, Architect and Engineer Co. San Francisco :1921, 80

³⁸ Transcribed from McCredie's student sketchbook.

³⁹ Freestone and Pullan, *From Wilkinson to Winston*

⁴⁰ Volz, Kirsty. "Women on the Heritage Register: the case of Nellie McCredie and Uanda House". *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand: 30, Open 2* (2013): 546.

⁴¹ Leslie Wilkinson, "Domestic Architecture" in Smith, Sydney Ure, and Bertram Stevens, eds. *Domestic Architecture in Australia: Special Number of Art in Australia*. Angus & Robertson, 1919. p. 3

⁴² Proudfoot, *Development of Architectural Education*

