

“There's nothing else. Just us, and the cameras, and those wonderful people out there in the dark. Now shut up, I'm rich.” Norma Desmond

BEVERLEY HILLS

61-65 DARLING STREET SOUTH YARRA

Howard Ratcliffe Lawson
"The Architect who Builds"

Beverley Hills, a tropical holiday apartment complex located on the South Yarra, is inescapably the product of eccentric interwar architect/builder Howard Lawson.

It is a luxurious pinnacle of a change in language when apartments and higher density living became more accepted. However, flats were still associated with the slum tenements of Europe and America and as such were banned in many places or rarely more than 2 storeys.

Howard Ratcliffe Lawson was an architect, developer and builder responsible most notably for Hollywood style dance halls, apartment complexes and the former Garden of the Moon on the summit of Arthur's seat. Being unable to register as an architect due to his activities in property development he advertised himself as "the architect who builds". Perhaps Australian architects, like their American counterparts considered advertising unethical, if not officially forbidden. In a "gentleman's profession" advertising is considered undignified.

Lawson imported many glamorous developmental models that were, at the time, extremely common in Southern California but virtually unknown in Australia. In Beverley Hills he employs his often used Hollywoodesque style of whimsical, novelty architecture and exotic Spanish Mission character in rendered terracotta tyle and barley sugar twist stucco. It is a scene that would be wrenchingly familiar to those moonlight cinema types who frequent Sunset Boulevard and the Spanish Mansions of 'In a Lonely Place', 'The Big Sleep' and 'Whatever happened to Baby Jane'.

The entrance is an opulent introduction to the two volumes of apartments. The steep hill they are set and the baroque stairs and drives between them are softened by extensive planting and a hill edge swimming pool with an underwater window.

The interior stairwells, open to the weather, begin to evoke the monastic qualities that are particularly susceptible to be romanticised in the semi darkness, and in the slightly dank scattering of neglected nouveau furnishings as you struggle the six floors to the roof terrace

Beverley Hills is an ending. Along with the passenger pidgeon and the paradise parrot, birds that are now footnotes upon the pages of avian history, this looming apartment building is a window into Lawson's dreams of glamour. It is dream no longer permissible by today's architectural and cultural standards. It is not merely a "little Beverley Hills" it is a ghost of an age when the rich were something to look up to for their phantasmagoric mystery. Who lives there now but the nostalgics and designer-wage-secure? While the rest of us are fighting for ventilation and sunlight do we still gaze up at the glamorous with wonder and excitement? Or cringe in jaded murmurings for the tall poppy seateurs?

