

Howard R Lawson

the architect who built

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Abstract

This article explores some of the myths surrounding the early twentieth-century Victorian architect, Howard R Lawson. Known today as the eclectic architect who designed the highly dramatic Beverley Hills flats at South Yarra (c. 1935–1936), his reputation has suffered over the decades due to misinformation and a misunderstanding of events. He was, in fact, a very progressive architect, with a keen interest in bettering lives through considered town planning and thoughtful design. Lawson utilised recycled materials well before it was considered to be fashionable or desirable, and was an early pioneer of building conversions in 1912, many decades ahead of his time.

How rumours almost became architectural history

Early twentieth-century Melbourne architect Howard Ratcliff Lawson was larger than life—a prolific designer with over 200 buildings to his name who held court with judges and ministers, discussing his progressive ideas for urban planning and social housing.

But Lawson has gently slipped through the cracks of architectural history. He is largely a forgotten architect, apart from being known as the genius mind behind South Yarra's astonishing Beverley Hills flats complex. And, in that genre of forgotten Australian architectural history, in the murky depths of vaguely remembered detail, his story has become muddled. Rumours and myths about him circulated for decades after his death, intensifying and becoming more fantastical with each retelling. Though held in high regard during his lifetime, his architecture was posthumously devalued, partly through the prism of stories that had become 'facts' in populist culture, and partly through a lack of either alternate information or extensive academic study to explain his design intent. The enormous tally of his works has also faded from history's pages, to the point where he is now generally only known for his 1930s works, and, of those, Beverley Hills (Figure 1) and Garden of the Moon (Arthurs Seat) (Figure 2), are the works with which he is mostly associated.

Lawson's reputation and name has been tarnished over time as a consequence of two main rumours: first, that he was not really an architect, yet called himself one; second, that he was a 'cheapskate' who used recycled materials to save costs. His later architecture, in particular, is very different to that of his contemporaries. There has been confusion over how best to define and label his works, partly due to a lack of understanding of who Lawson actually was and what drove his architectural mind. Delving into the archives of history clarifies not only what drove him and his insatiable appetite for design and construction, but also illuminates his life, putting to rest many of the rumours about him. In this article, I discuss and dispel the two main rumours.

The architect who builds: the tagline that came to define the rumour

It is frequently said that Lawson himself came up with the tagline 'the architect who builds' after he was refused registration as an architect. While this makes for a colourful story, and has been repeated in both published works[1] and opinion pieces[2] on social media platforms,[3] it is a tangled explanation of the truth. It has also been suggested that Lawson only began property development (and using his famous 'architect who builds' tagline) after his registered architect application was refused.[4] Rather than a flamboyant salesman who pretended to be what he was not, the archives show a different sequence of events that paints a very different picture.



Figure 1: Lawson recycled many elements of earlier building fabrics in his landmark Beverley Hills flats (c. 1935–1936). The stunning leadlight and stained glass window in an apartment in Block 2 is believed to have come from one, or more, of the nineteenth-century mansions of Toorak that were demolished in the early 1930s. This area was originally the cafe and small shop for the complex, but has since been converted into an apartment. Personal photo supplied to the author by Heather Nette-King.

Lawson enrolled in architecture and building construction studies at the Working Men's College (now RMIT) in 1902, when he was 17 years old, and studied there for the next three years.[5] Initially, he worked as a builder, and would only later work as an architect. His maternal uncle, Ernest Henry Ratcliff, was a director of the Glen Iris Brick and Tile Company, as well as a builder and investor.[6] The young Lawson worked for his uncle as a building manager,[7] and first garnered public attention for his role as the daring young builder of the Britannia Theatre in Bourke Street, Melbourne, in 1912.



THE ROSE SERIES P. 279 "THE GARDEN OF THE MOON", HOLLYWOOD, ARTHURS SEAT, VIC.

Figure 2: The extraordinarily imaginative Garden of the Moon tourist folly at Arthurs Seat on the Mornington Peninsula (constructed c. 1939) was one of Lawson's final designs. It encapsulated Lawson's belief in the importance of leisure via architectural fantasy. Rose Stereograph Company, *The Garden of the Moon, Hollywood, Arthurs Seat, Vic.*, [c. 1940s], State Library of Victoria, Pictures Collection, H32492/362.



Figure 3: Lawson gained welcome publicity for his progressive ideas of efficiency as the young building manager of the Britannia Theatre in 1912. Unknown photographer and date, Britannia Theatre, Cinema Treasures, available online at <<http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/52931>>, viewed May 2020.

The architect of the new picture theatre was Nahum Barnett, but it was the radical method of building that attracted interest.[8] In order to complete the building ahead of schedule, Lawson introduced then novel concepts of efficiency. Bricklayers were encouraged to break the world record in bricklaying by being given monetary incentives to best their efforts. A 24-hour shift system was used, with massive arc lamps providing illumination at night. This allowed Lawson to run multiple trades onsite at the same time, and not lose valuable hours overnight waiting for one trade to finish before the next began. In a very early use of pre-built offsite construction, gangs of carpenters built the roof in sections in vacant allotments, which were then transported to the site for installation.

But perhaps the greatest insight into Lawson's architectural understanding from a structural viewpoint was his unusual idea to completely 'reverse the order of affairs'[9] by constructing the brick walls *before* the basement was excavated; this also shows his application of a new way of thinking to achieve efficiency. The highly noted *Building* magazine, then a well-read publication outlining the latest in both architecture and construction news in Australia, ran a story exclaiming:

That bricklaying record on a picture theatre job in Bourke-street was no fake. I write as one who saw the men at work, and assisted afterwards in the measuring up. The joints were left neat and clean on both sides, and the wall is deemed by the architect quite good enough to carry a specially heavy domed roof ... If any place in the world has a better showing we would be glad to hear of it. The Trades Hall people were not at all put out [by] the 'speeding' of it as one of the papers tried to make out.[10]

In fact, Lawson was so proud of this extraordinary achievement—completing the building 'in 3 months and 21 days, instead of the contract time of 5 ½ months'[11]—that he made it the cornerstone of his speech on efficiency a few years later, given to the Accountants' Society of Students in 1917.[12] This speech gives a very good clue into the workings of Lawson's mind, and helps to explain why he favoured exploring new ways of doing things, rather than following the status quo.

Recycling: pioneering Melbourne warehouse conversions

Hot on the heels of the great success of the Britannia Theatre, Lawson embarked on two even more ambitious projects in 1912, this time applying his skills in building efficiency to property development and working in his own employ. The bold scheme involved recycling an entire factory into completely new uses. While this is common

today, and is considered architecturally clever as well as environmentally responsible, in early twentieth-century Melbourne, it was inspired.

The Hoadley family, known in Australia for their confectionary and chocolate manufacturing, were friends with Lawson. When the Hoadleys decided to sell their jam factory at Snowden Gardens near Princes Bridge, South Melbourne (Figure 4), in favour of new premises a little further out of the city, the large landholding set Lawson's active imagination into top gear.



Figure 4: Hoadley jam factory, c. 1900, before conversion to a theatre and flats. Robert Vere Scott, photographer, *Looking south across Yarra River at Princes Bridge, Melbourne, c. 1890–1910*, State Library of Victoria, Pictures Collection, H2006.48.

Abel Hoadley had wanted to sell the factory as a whole but, due to lack of interest, split it into two parts: south (which was to be leased) and north (which was to be sold). This gave Lawson the chance to get involved in both parts, but in different ways. Lawson purchased the northern portion for the sum of £14,000 in August 1912. [13] Considering that he was only 27 years old and, at that stage, a building manager with architectural aspirations, it was an extraordinary sum of money.

Lawson planned to convert the factory into flats, and would fund the works, as well as recoup the original purchase price, via the raising of shares for a new company to oversee the process. This prospectus was advertised in *Punch* the following month.[14] The choice of architect for the conversion was Robert Haddon, who had been head of architecture when Lawson studied at the Working Men's College, a fact that no doubt influenced Lawson's selection. Haddon was well known as being flexible in working with other Melbourne architects, and was held in high regard by the architectural profession. [15]

The prospectus makes it clear that Lawson's own designing eye and hand were also at work: 'The alterations, which are estimated to cost £5800, have been designed by Mr R. J. Haddon, the architect of the proposed Company, and by Mr Lawson':[16] The prospectus explained that the proposed Alexandra Mansions would be designed to include the very latest ideas in modern flat living, and would:

Comprise suites of rooms with all accessories complete, and also single rooms. Hot and cold water will be laid on to all bathrooms, the building will be lit by electric light, while every modern comfort in the way of ventilation, heaters, telephones, etc., will be installed, where necessary, throughout the buildings.[17]

The new flats were intended to provide short- and long-term accommodation for middle-class tenants, and were a response to the growing demand for flats as an alternative to boarding houses. Most flats in Melbourne at this time were either conversions from existing residential properties (i.e., mansions into flats) or were purpose-built on the land of former mansions.

Solving the servant problem

Lawson believed that the Yarra River, then a dumping ground for the various factories that lined its banks, could be a desirable location.[18] Signalling both this and his belief in the value of providing a more modern style of accommodation to respond to changing social conditions, the prospectus extolled the benefits of lifestyle for future residents:

These Mansions will be at the very door of the city, on the south side of Prince's Bridge, facing eastward towards the panorama of the Alexandra Drive, the winding river, and the city beyond, and fronting immediately the picturesque slope of Snowden Gardens ...

Residents in the Mansions will be so near the city that they may easily walk to any of its business centres within a few minutes, while every modern appliance and convenience to enable residents to enjoy life while minimising the 'servant problem' will be provided.[19]

The southern part of the Hoadley factory was also recycled into a totally new use, again with Lawson's involvement. A new company, Snowden Pictures, leased this portion, with the intention of converting it into a silent picture theatre. [20] 'The alterations will be under the supervision of Mr Lawson, who has just completed the Britannia Theatre', explained the prospectus.[21] Lawson held financial interest in the project too, as he was also a director of the Snowden Picture company.[22] One of his fellow directors was his friend, Walter Hoadley, son of Abel Hoadley.

Lawson's expertise in swift and efficient building programs meant that the Snowden Picture Theatre was open by the end of October 1912, just three months after the prospectus was advertised. The architect credited for this work was A Phipps Coles, but it is difficult not to ponder how much influence Lawson would have imparted, given his later works and passion for new ideas. In any case, the theatre was applauded for its modern use of colourful, and moving, lighting on the facade, which was then a relatively unusual concept:

The Snowden Picture Theatre, with vari-coloured disappearing electric lights illuminating its entrance at Prince's bridge, was formally opened last evening ... The theatre is replete with the most modern fittings. There is a nursery with bassinets for infants, left in charge of the nurse, a smokers' gallery, screened off with plate glass, at the rear of the dress circle, from which there is an uninterrupted view of the picture screen; and refreshments nooks, where ices and other delicacies can be enjoyed without any of the programme being missed. Special attention has been paid to the ventilation, and with the electric fans.[23]

Both buildings were later demolished. Today the site is part of Melbourne's greater arts precinct and the National Gallery of Victoria, Southbank.

Importantly, the conversion of a factory into flats and a picture theatre foreshadowed Lawson's life-long interest in recycling building materials, and goes towards an understanding of his beliefs in efficiency. Figure 5 is an undated photograph of the front facade of Alexandra Mansions and the Snowden Picture Theatre that, although fairly faint, is nonetheless helpful in seeing how one building became two. This image also reveals the use of large letters mounted above the roofline of the buildings. In itself, this was a novel idea at the time, and was an early use of building advertising designed to be seen from afar.

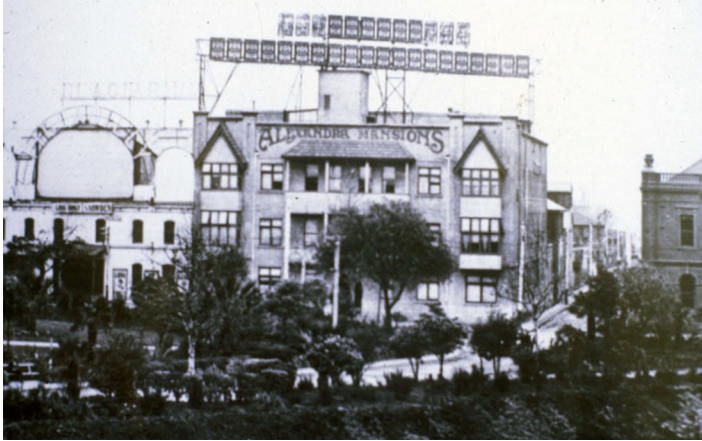


Figure 5: Alexandra Mansions was a very early example of adaptive building re-use, converting a former factory into upmarket flats, including a rooftop garden for residents' use. Unknown photographer, title and date, image courtesy of Professor Miles Lewis.

Figure 6 shows the side of these buildings, c. 1920, and the 'picturesque' Snowden Gardens on the opposite side of the theatre and Alexandra Mansions.



The architect and respected expert emerges

From 1916, Lawson referred to himself as an architect, and became increasingly active as a spokesperson for both building efficiency and better town planning. He was called to appear before the Victorian Government's Royal Commission on Housing Conditions in 1916,[24] set up to explore how best to deal with the shortage of men and materials during the Great War. Introduced as 'Mr Howard R Lawson, architect', he was asked his opinion on the effect of reducing house sizes to no more than a quarter of a block, and how he managed to contain the building costs of his own house designs. 'Architect tells secret' screamed the newspaper headline reporting on his evidence.[25] The article explained that Lawson felt that 'more attention should ... be paid to the design of the house' and revealed that he used a system of specialised tradesmen to achieve his efficiencies: 'I have one man who does nothing but window skirting, and so on ... My workmen are a happy family ... there is absolutely no talk of "slowing down"'. [26]

It is testimony to the regard in which Lawson was held that he was invited to give evidence as an expert witness at no less than three separate royal commissions regarding building matters (1913, 1916 and 1924). Lawson regularly had articles published in the Melbourne papers discussing town planning issues and aspects of housing design, and conversed on town planning matters with the chief architect for the Public Works Department.[27] He was invited to speak at the Accountants' Student Society about building efficiency in 1917 (as mentioned above), and the speech was later reprinted in London newspapers. Lawson moved in influential circles, with politicians, judges and captains of industry among his acquaintance.

The famous tagline appears

Increasingly busy, Lawson designed and built flats and houses for private clients in an idiosyncratic Arts and Crafts style, always looking to promote his services in imaginative ways. His 'architect who builds' tagline seems to have evolved from an earlier descriptor—'architect who builds fashionable houses in town or country', which appeared in an advert in the *Prahran Telegraph* in 1918 and was repeated in numerous other publications (Figure 7).[28]

Figure 6: The recycled buildings of the Snowden Picture Theatre and Alexandra Mansions can be seen on the left side of this image, looking north towards the city. Sir Robert Gibson, photographer, *Looking across river towards Flinders St Station*, c. 1922, State Library of Victoria, Pictures Collection, H42558/6.



Figure 7: Lawson's famous 'architect who builds' by-line appears to have evolved from an earlier, longer descriptor—'the architect who builds fashionable houses in town or country' line, which first appeared around 1918, well before he applied for architectural registration in 1923. Advertisement, *Prahan Telegraph*, 2 March 1918, p 4.

In 1919, *Real Property Annual* published an interview with Lawson, billed as 'the architect who builds', under the title 'Modern flats and bungalows from the specialist's point of view'. The story featured several of Lawson's 'recent works' for Arts and Crafts properties.[29]

Tagline as sulking response?

Until the *Architects Registration Act* amendment was passed in 1939, use of the title 'registered architect' was not restricted. Lawson was perfectly entitled to call himself an architect at this time, before formal registration necessitated that rules must be followed.

The increasing demand for new housing after World War I altered the types of designs that were desirable in most parts of the British Empire, including Melbourne. Soldiers returned from the front and new businesses were launched and marriages entered into. As a result of shortages during the war, domestic servants had become a legacy of the past, except in the wealthiest of households, and there was an upsurge in demand for houses and flats that could be managed without servants. [30] In this fast-moving housing bubble, some builders claimed the title of 'architect' to advertise their services. Members of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects (RVIA) began to agitate for a way to separate jerry-builders

from those who practised architecture as a profession, adhering to a set of regulated standards and knowledge of architectural history and design. The members believed that some sort of formal recognition would help to define the two groups.

In 1922, the Victorian Parliament passed the *Architects Registration Act*, which decreed that a newly formed Architects Registration Board of Victoria would have the power to create a register of members, and could 'issue or cancel certificates of registration'. [31] This Act also limited the use of the title 'registered architect' to members who had been admitted to the board's register. The board could choose to admit members on several grounds. For example, an applicant who did not hold formal qualifications, but had 'for a period of at least one year before the first day of January One thousand nine hundred and twenty-three [sic] been bonâ fide engaged in Victoria in the practice of the profession of an architect and ... made application for registration within six months after that date' could be admitted. [32]

It was under this option that Lawson chose to apply in 1923. For reasons unknown, he did not mention his earlier study of architecture at the Working Men's College, but instead stated: 'I have been 12 years engaged in Victoria in practice as an Architect' (Figure 8). [33] The exchange that followed between Lawson and the Architects Registration Board tells a more detailed story, and can be found in the original file of application held at Public Record Office Victoria. [34]

The board requested a meeting with Lawson to discuss his application. While there are no details of what was discussed, it seems that Lawson provided examples of his works that involved both design and construction, as the board subsequently, and very subtly, suggested that he would do better to supply a list of buildings that he had designed only—not designed *and* built.

The letter noted that: 'The Board does not regard the mixed practice of designing buildings and carrying out Building operations as bona fide practice of the profession of an Architect'. [35] If Lawson had carefully read between the lines, he would have realised that he was being given another chance. Lawson could easily have produced a list of buildings that satisfied the board's delicately worded request, as evidenced in his later court documents. But he did not do this, instead choosing to respond with firm resolve and admonition of the board's point of view. He instructed his solicitors to prepare and send a letter detailing a very long list of buildings that he had proudly designed *and* built, as well as enclosing several glowing

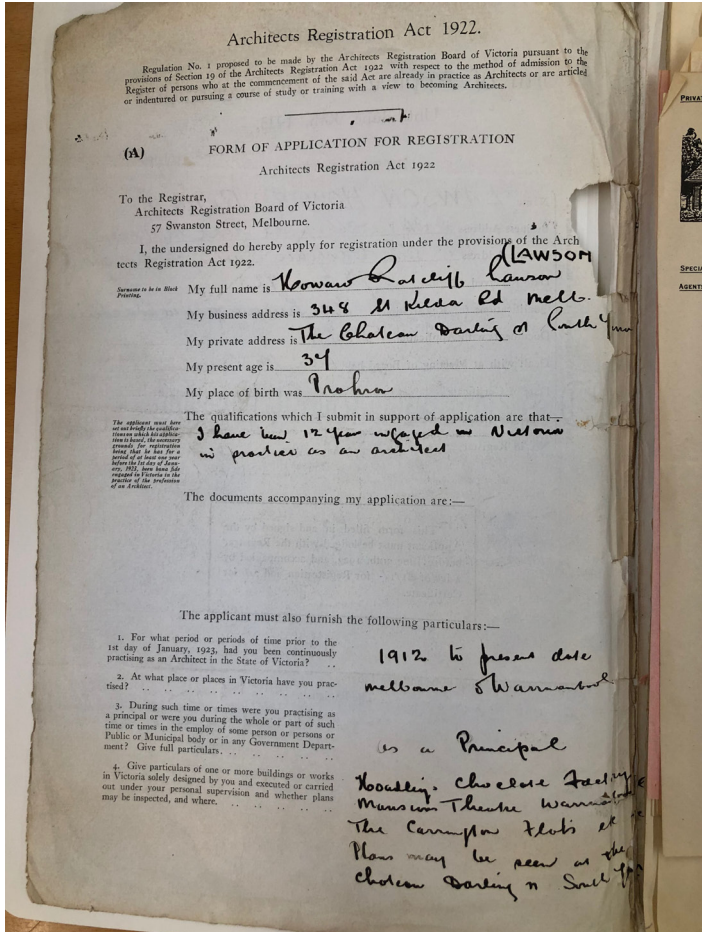


Figure 8: Howard Lawson's application for registration as an architect in 1923 clearly shows his handwriting and his reason to be considered, VPRS 8838/P1 Individual Architects Files, Unit 9, Lawson, Howard Ratcliff (1923-), Form application for Registration, signed and dated 27 June 1923.

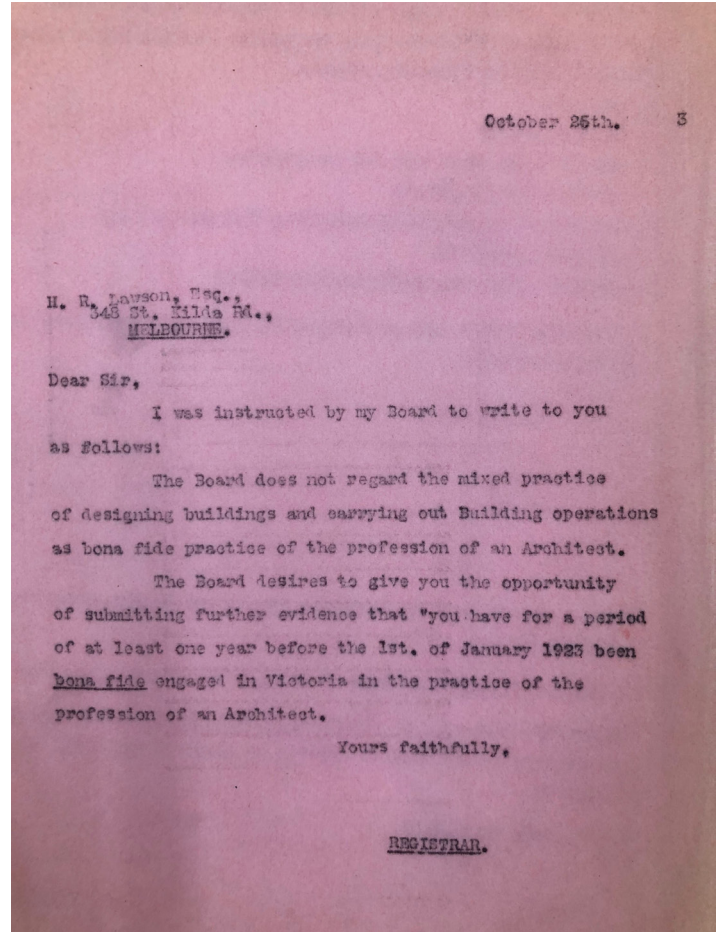


Figure 9: This letter holds a clue as to why Lawson was refused registration as an architect in 1923. The Architects Registration Board hinted that if Lawson provided further evidence, it would give him another opportunity for admission, PROV, VPRS 8838/P1 Individual Architects Files, Unit 9, Howard Ratcliff (1923-), Architects Registration Board to Howard Lawson, 25 October 1923.

letters from his clients. An excerpt provides insight into Lawson's determination:

Attention to this matter has been delayed owing to the holiday season; but we now enclose a list of buildings designed by Mr. H. R. Lawson and built by his Company under his supervision. We submit [that] your Board's previous decision was wrong and that on the evidence before it our Client's application should have been granted. However, we tender this further evidence in compliance with your Board's wish, and confidently expect that our client will experience no further trouble in obtaining registration.[36]

However, the exchanges between the board and Lawson's solicitors moved further and further from resolution, and dragged on for some months as neither side would budge. A terse letter from Lawson's solicitors to the board in February 1924 expressed Lawson's sense of righteous

indignation: in addition to threatening legal action, it asserted that the board was 'not entitled to put its own narrow interpretation on the words "the practice of the profession of an Architect"' (Figure 10).[37]

Not surprisingly, after receiving the letter the board decided to end the matter with a final decision addressed directly to Lawson. To reinforce that the matter was concluded, they returned his application fee (Figure 11).

Lawson's decision to fight rather than conform created the basis of a later-muddled story that reversed the sequence of true events, and led to a rumour about his claim to be an architect.

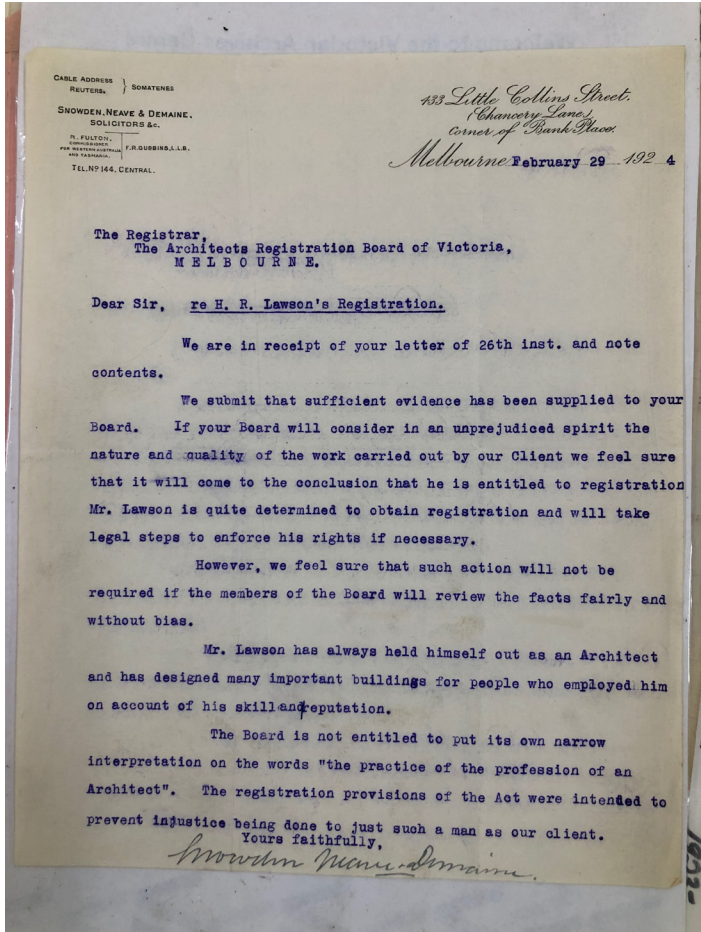


Figure 10: This terse letter from Lawson's solicitors provides valuable insight into Lawson's indignation at not being able to both design and build his own works, PROV, VPRS 8838/P1 Individual Architects Registration Files, Unit 9, Howard Ratcliff (1923-), Snowden, Neave & Demaine to the Architectural Registration Board, 29 February 1924.

Was Lawson an architect then?

The *Architects Registration Act 1922* did not quite achieve all the RVIA had intended, as the Act only stopped people who were not members of the Architects Registration Board from using the title 'registered architect'; it did not prevent non-members from describing themselves as architects. Therefore, Lawson was allowed to continue calling himself an architect until 1939, and he did. At the end of 1939, an amendment to the Act placed further restrictions on the permitted use of titles.[38] The amendment stated that neither 'architect' nor 'registered architect' could be claimed by people who had not been admitted by the Architects Registration Board.

Ironically, the majority of the vast number of designs—over 200—that Lawson produced, including Beverley Hills and Garden of the Moon, were created prior to the end of

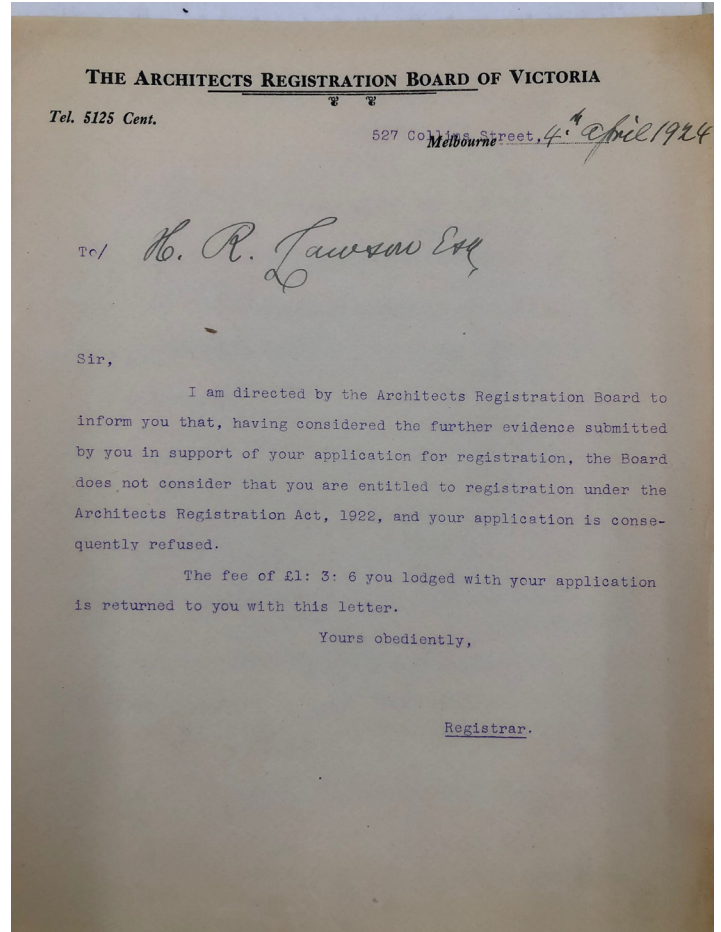


Figure 11: The final letter from the Architects Registration Board to Lawson politely refunded his application fee, bringing the matter to an unambiguous if ignominious end, PROV, VPRS 8838/P1 Individual Architects Registration Files, Unit 9, Lawson, Howard Ratcliff (1923-), Architects Registration Board to Howard Lawson, 4 April 1924.

1939, so were well within the timeframe in which he was legitimately allowed to call himself an architect. Thus, the rumour about him falsely claiming this title is incorrect.

The reality is that Lawson simply got caught in the crosswires of an evolving definition of what constituted the profession of a registered architect in the early twentieth century, as the industry tried to position itself in a changing world. It is clear that Lawson both understood, and applied, the principles of architectural design. The extant examples of his works, such as Beverley Hills, are testament to this.

World War II curtailed building activities across Australia, restricting works between 1939 and 1945 for most architects and builders. After the war ended, Lawson was looking forward to resuming his business, but such plans came to abrupt end when he died in January 1946.

Lawson left behind a legacy of extraordinarily imaginative buildings. He used recycled materials in his buildings not because he was a 'cheapskate', as so many have falsely alleged, but because he had a passion for efficiency and an appreciation of the inherent value of beautiful things. His use of recycled products was decades ahead of his time. Whether that meant recycling a factory into a new style of residential housing, like Alexandra Mansions, or celebrating the beauty of a nineteenth-century leadlight window in the 1935–1936 Beverley Hills flats, Lawson was never afraid to follow his own convictions.

Held in high esteem during his lifetime, the rumours that damaged his reputation were posthumous, and may, in part, have circulated due to changing ideas about what was considered desirable in the pursuit of contemporary architecture post–World War II. An emphasis on new materials and simplicity of form meant that recycling was not valued. Further, the use of decorative elements was no longer seen as playful or whimsical, but as an affront to the streamlined 'honesty' of postwar architecture. Indeed, during the mid-twentieth century, the architectural establishment eschewed 'playful' architecture as old-fashioned. The good and the bad were thrown together and relegated to history. In so doing, Lawson's architecture was devalued and his use of recycled elements misunderstood. Somewhat ironically, our current awareness of the need to preserve and value existing materials in a world that is looking for new methods for sustainability have made Lawson's ideas on recycling suddenly appealing.

The origin of the rumours and myths about both Lawson and his architecture are hard to pinpoint. Left unchallenged, what is certain is that, over the decades, they grew more colourful and exaggerated, taking on fantastical proportions. These popular stories were repeated in detail, so that, over time, they became accepted facts. Lawson was perceived as something of a scoundrel, an element that makes for a great story. From real estate copy to social media platforms, the story has run unfettered.

If the true measure of successful architecture is the ability to hold value independent of its creator, then Howard Lawson's architectural legacy is quite safe. His rampaging imagination was not constrained by existing frameworks. He dreamed and built ideas that embody the power of architecture to transform the everyday into a world of whimsical imagination and beauty. Truly, that is his, and our, architectural and social heritage legacy, and no rumours or myths can dispel it.

Endnotes

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- [26] *Ibid.*
- [27] 'Ratepayer critical', *Herald*, 19 October 1916, p. 4.
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- [30] Graeme Butler, *The Californian bungalow in Australia*, Lothian, Port Melbourne, 1995, pp. 27–29.
- [31] *Architects Registration Act 1922*, State Parliament of Victoria.
- [32] Clause 7.(1), *Architects Registration Act 1922*, State Parliament of Victoria.
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- [35] *Ibid.*, Architects Registration Board of Victoria to Howard Lawson, 25 October 1923.
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