

So High you can't get over it: Neo-classicism, Modernism and Colonial Practice in the forming of a Twentieth-Century Architectural Landmark

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ABSTRACT: Amyas Connell (1901-80) was a New Zealand architect and a leading figure in British modernism. His first commission, *High and Over* (1929-31) for the archaeologist and classical scholar Bernard Ashmole was described as the first fully worked out modernist house built in England. The project drew attention from a wide range of architectural critics including Howard Robertson and the *Country Life* writer Christopher Hussey. A short film entitled *The House of a Dream* made by British Pathé ensured the house was seen by the large cinema audience in 1931. *High and Over* became more contentious over time when Connell's intention to combine classical and modern design tendencies was criticised by more doctrinaire modernists. *High and Over* occupies a place where the traditions of classicism and the emergent features of modernism intersect. Connell's path, if taken, may have produced a distinctively British form of classical modernism.

This paper seeks to establish the context for *High and Over* from a New Zealand perspective and through comparison with other projects by colonial architects in Britain. Connell's critical profile has been shaped by the notion that British modernism was in the hands of "Wild Colonial Boys," a soubriquet used to frame Connell's work in the 1930s by the British writer Dennis Sharp. In this interpretation, the depth of Connell's experience prior to *High and Over* is overlooked. Connell's partnership with the Australian-born Stewart Lloyd Thomson (1902-90) has not been covered in any previous study of the Connell, Ward and Lucas practice. The *High and Over* project included a number of related structures set in a landscape plan not usually included in analysis of the complex whole. The relationship between the garden plan and the designs of the Armenian architect Gabriel Guévrekian seen at the Paris Exposition and the *Villa Noailles* at Hyères (1927) has also not been traversed.

Introduction

This paper sets out to explore the design sources for the house *High and Over* (1929-31), arguably one of the only buildings by a New Zealand architect that commands a significant place in international architectural history. It was an unusual fusion of classical geometry, Beaux-arts planning, Corbusean aesthetic and Parisian décor. This rich combination of elements has polarised opinion on its merits as a piece of modernist architecture. I intend to separate these strands in terms of Connell's design experience prior to this significant first commission that included articulated training in

New Zealand, work in London offices, education at the University College of London Architectural Atelier and the British School in Rome. Connell's landscape design of *High and Over* will be viewed with particular emphasis on French modernist garden design of the 1920s. Connell's interest in the villas of Hadrianic Rome was evident in the centralised plan for *High and Over*. Its use reveals a regard for classical geometry and planning that transcends the usual explanations for such practices in the Beaux Arts teaching systems adopted in British architectural education.

Amyas Douglas Connell was born in the Taranaki dairy town of Eltham in 1901 where his father was a professional photographer and landscape painter. According to his brother Jock, Connell also wanted to be an artist but was unsure of his future direction and laboured on a dairy factory construction site over the summer after his final year at school.¹ The site is unknown but Taranaki was in the midst of a construction boom led by the Harewa architect Jack Duffill who designed over 100 dairy buildings in the region alone.²

¹ Connell Pers. Comm.

² Bartle "The House that Jack Built" n.p.

Many of these were built in the new medium of steel reinforced concrete and Duffill is recognised as a pioneer of this method in New Zealand. Typical of the buildings constructed in Eltham in 1918 was the Church of England Men's Club on Bridge Street, later absorbed into the New Zealand Rennet Company complex that began alongside it in 1916.³ This ferro-cement building with its classical façade incorporated the two main threads of Connell's early practical experience in New Zealand, advanced construction and neo-classical formality. Jock Connell recalled that this job focussed Connell's interest in architecture and in 1919 he travelled to Wellington to be articled to the firm of Young and Fearn. Stanley Fearn offered Connell a four-year term and a relatively generous salary of £2.3.4 per month, rising to £5.8.4 at the fourth year.⁴ It was common for articled pupils to receive no payment at all under these arrangements and Connell's remuneration suggests that Fearn expected to get good work from him.

³ South Taranaki District Council "New Zealand Rennet Company, 2-28 Bridge Street, 1918" p 12.

⁴ New Zealand Institute of Architects Archives, Item 54, p 8.

British-born Fearn's practice was well ranked in terms of his New Zealand contemporaries and he was the first recipient of the NZIA Gold Medal in 1927 for the William Booth Memorial Training College in Aro Street, a project actually completed in 1913.⁵ Fearn's design approach was based on tasteful but conservative American neo-classical and Georgian revivalism but Connell received an up-to-date training with the firm and at night classes organised by the Wellington branch of the New Zealand Institute of Architects. This Atelier training followed the model established by the Royal Institute of British Architects and the university-based schools of architecture. Connell's first year course of study under the NZIA education scheme included a testimony of study, the history of architecture, practical mathematics, structural mathematics, building construction, freehand drawing and an oral examination.⁶ Competitions were important proving grounds for young architects and, in 1921, Connell won a competition organised by the Wellington branch of the NZIA for a war

⁵ Anon. "Selected NZIA Awards 1927-1949" *Exquisite Apart* p 30.

⁶ New Zealand Institute of Architects Archives, Item 57, p 65.

memorial.⁷ This was followed by a third place in an NZIA-sponsored national competition, Connell coming in behind Gordon Wilson, the future Government Architect.⁸

Having met his future professional partner Basil Robert Ward through the Wellington Architectural Students Association, and with Fearn's encouragement, Connell decided to seek further opportunities in London. It added to their myth in later years that they worked their passage as coal trimmers on the *SS Karamea*. They arrived in Britain in 1924 and began seeking work. Connell rented a room at Clements Inn Passage and worked in a number of offices, most notably that of the arts and crafts architects William and Edward Hunt.⁹ Although money was tight, Connell and Ward travelled to France and visited *L'Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes* in Paris in 1925 where they viewed Le Corbusier's *Pavillon L'Esprit Nouveau*. In his recollections from the 1960s, Ward was dismissive of the exposition apart from Le Corbusier's contribution but this is a retrospective view from his position as

⁷ "New Zealand Institute of Architects Wellington Branch Competition for War Memorial" pp 12-13.

⁸ "Notes" p 75.

⁹ "News and Topics" p 872.

theorist and historian of the practice.¹⁰ There was much at the exposition to excite young colonial architects. Amongst the most talked about sights was a cubist garden, *le Jardin d'eau et de lumière*, by the Armenian architect Gabriel Guévrékian.¹¹ This densely organised triangular garden used a revolving faceted glass sphere, tiered triangular concrete pools, horizontal water jets, coloured electric light and the optical vibration of complementary colour planes to explore notions of space and time. As with other French modernist garden designs, this was nothing to do with horticulture or the picturesque. It was an "instant garden," constructed from metal and hard-edged concrete and described variously as "Persian," "cubist" and "modern." Avant-garde French garden design had a close relationship to the contemporary visual and plastic arts and there was much interest in Guévrékian's combination of cubist geometry, technology, abstract form and three-dimensional volumes in relation to garden design. Connell's interest in painting was channelled into landscape architecture during the early phase of his solo practice and a number of his early projects included

developed garden plans. These threads were brought together when Guévrékian worked briefly with Connell, Ward and Lucas later in the 1930s while in exile from Iran. Unfortunately none of their projects eventuated and Guévrékian spent the war in Paris.¹²

Connell and Ward chose to study at the architectural atelier associated with the Bartlett School of the University College London. The atelier has been described as an add-on to the Bartlett, surviving from Reginald Blomfield's aspiration to copy the architectural teaching systems of the French Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Studying at the atelier did not require formal enrolment or lead to any qualifications, but it was considered a useful place to network and establish connections as well as for preparing the large and complex drawings required for competitions. The atelier was led by French-born and Beaux-Arts trained Hector Othon Corfiato, whom both Connell and Ward regarded highly. He also met his first professional partner at the atelier, the Australian modernist Stewart Lloyd Thomson

(1902-90).¹³ His interactions at the atelier enabled Connell to assess his work against that of fellow students as well as receive critical guidance from Corfiato and others. Connell's New Zealand experience seems to have measured up well against his British contemporaries, as it became his intention during 1925 to compete for the prestigious Rome Scholarship in Architecture.¹⁴

Connell's drawings for a memorial hall to Admiral Nelson, entered under the title "Roma," were exhibited at the RIBA and he passed through to the final selection. A new set of drawings for a naval academy was submitted for the final competition under the pseudonym "Castos" and Connell was informed that he had been awarded the Rome Scholarship in Architecture in June 1926.¹⁵ Ward had also entered the competition and gained second place but had neglected to join the RIBA and was therefore ineligible for the Henry Jarvis Travelling Studentship. He was awarded a special studentship from the Jarvis

¹⁰ Ward "Connell, Ward and Lucas"

¹¹ Imbert *The Modernist Garden in France*

¹² Vitou "Guévrékian, Gabriel" n.p.

¹³ Thomson "Form of Application for Admission as a Fellow" 1939. Ref. 3673. Royal Institute of British Architecture Archives.

¹⁴ Ward "Connell, Ward and Lucas" p 78.

¹⁵ Shaw to Connell. 29 June 1926.

Fund instead.¹⁶ Despite being "the highest tree in the orchard," personal rifts in its management and declining standards in its teaching programmes affected the status of the Rome School in the mid-1920s. As well as being chronically underfunded, there was no consistent educational policy and the instruction tended to reinforce the divide between architecture as a profession and an academic discipline. A large number of Rome and Jarvis prize-winners went back to teach at schools of architecture and the course was criticised for its lack of relevance to practice. In 1924 the term of the scholarship was shortened to two years, with a third year available on application, in an effort to meet the requirements of students keen to enter practice. The scholarship provided an annual stipend, board and lodging; financial support that was crucial to Connell's extended stay in Europe. Connell and Ward celebrated by taking three months leave of absence and returning to New Zealand where civic receptions were held to mark their achievements.¹⁷ They arrived back in London for Christmas 1926, working their passage once again, this time on the *SS Ruapehu*.¹⁸

¹⁶ "Personal" p 10.

¹⁷ Shaw to unknown recipient. 19 September 1927.

¹⁸ Connell to Shaw. 14 November 1926.

In many ways the Rome Prize was created for individuals like Connell and Ward, being established to foster talent in young architects who found it difficult to pay their way through articulated training and university-based education. The competition was open to any British subject under the age of 30. Neither were Connell and Ward the first New Zealanders to achieve success in this field. Edward Armstrong (1896-1992), an ex-serviceman from Gisborne, was awarded the Jarvis Scholarship in 1921 and the same honour went the following year to Akaroa-born George Checkley (1893-1960) who had also entered Liverpool School of Architecture on a grant.¹⁹ Both Armstrong and Checkley went on to contribute to the British modern movement, Checkley through a pair of early houses at Cambridge, and Armstrong as the designer of sensitively detailed blocks of working class flats in and around London. Checkley, although a retiring individual, was an important link for the colonials of the late 1920s. He was part of the architectural set at Cambridge that included the Australian Raymond McGrath and his client Mansfield Forbes whose remodelled Georgian house

¹⁹ Charles Reilly & *The Liverpool School of Architecture* p 168.

Finella (1929) was an early rallying point for British modernists. Connell's British-born partner Colin Lucas was a student of Checkley's and he was among the first British architects to proceed to practice direct from a university degree rather than articulated training.

The main area of study for architects at the British School was the restoration, through drawings of ruined ancient sites. This was carried out in an interdisciplinary manner alongside students from art and archaeology departments. During Connell's first year he completed drawings of the Campdoglio including its Roman remnants, and researched the archaeological bibliography of Capri in preparation for his restoration of the Villa of Tiberius. Connell stated his interest in the "great villas of Imperial Rome" because of their interesting layouts and "purity of style."²⁰ The Rome scholarship included funding for travel and Connell reported visiting Capri, Naples, Salerno, Amalfi, Ravello, Genoa, Florence, Lucia, Pisa, Sienna, Venice, Ravella, Bologna, Padova, Torino and Milano. Additionally he spent ten days in Paris at the Ecole des Beaux Arts studying drawings and

²⁰ Connell "Application for Renewal of Scholarship at The British School at Rome" 1927.

managed to visit Dijon, Lyons, Marseilles and the Riviera.²¹ Connell made four visits to Capri to survey the ruins of the Villa of Tiberius. The actual site was far less accessible than today as it was extensively cleared and excavated by an Italian team in 1932. The multi-disciplinary approach to architectural restorations at the Rome School placed Connell with artists who would later become highly significant in British modernism. These included the painter and designer Rex Whistler (1905-44) who assisted Connell by painting the trees on his reconstruction of the Villa Tiberius.²² Connell's third year collaborative project was the design of a booking hall for a large tourist office with murals contributed by the social realist artist Reginald Brill (1902-74) who held the scholarship in painting from 1927 to 1929. Brill also completed a formal portrait of Connell holding a folio of his Rome Prize drawings.²³

Under the terms of the Rome Prize, Connell was obliged to apply for a renewal of his scholarship for a third year and he was supported by glowing testimonials from both

²¹ Connell "Application for Renewal of Scholarship at The British School at Rome" 1928.

²² Campbell "A Call To Order" p 140.

²³ Giovenco. Pers. Comm.

Rome and the London-based secretary of the school, Evylyn Shaw, who wrote that "Connell's case appears to be so strong that I am quite prepared to do my best to get it through even if it is necessary to ask Sassoon or someone else for the money."²⁴ Shaw was referring to a private donor of the school Sir Phillip Sassoon, a liberal British MP and cousin of the poet Phillip Sassoon. Connell worked on his major reconstruction during 1928 with particular attention to the Villa's complex hilltop setting. The largest of Tiberius' numerous structures on the island, the Villa originally stood five levels high and was a demanding structure to represent. Even at 1/16" scale, the plan sheet measured 7' x 6', and was accompanied by elevations and sections almost as large. These drawings were left incomplete when Connell resigned his scholarship in January 1929 to return to London and commence his first architectural commission.

It is well known that the client for Connell's first project was the retiring director of the British School at Rome, the classical scholar Bernard Ashmole (1894-1988). Ashmole was young, energetic and liberal – an unusual

²⁴ Shaw to Ashmole 15 July 1928.

combination of attributes in a Director of the Rome School – but he had been appointed to the position in 1925 in order to rescue the School's falling reputation. Ashmole held the Rome School position for three years, resigning in 1928 to take up the Yates Chair of Archaeology at University College, London. Ashmole regarded Connell as the star of the Rome School and later wrote that his study of the Capitol in Rome revealed "their subtleties perhaps more thoroughly than anyone before, except perhaps their creator."²⁵ The question remains why Ashmole would trust an untried architect with such an ambitious first project when he had the choice of any practicing architect in Britain. Connell was somewhat reticent himself in pinpointing the reason for his client's faith but the combination of Connell's deep understanding of classical architecture alongside the emergent themes of modernism as seen in France and Germany in the mid-1920s was compelling. Connell's letter resigning his scholarship was addressed to Ashmole's successor A Hamilton-Smith and is vague about the reason for his early departure, stating only that "a second opportunity has occurred during my period at

²⁵ Ashmole *Bernard Ashmole* p 51.

the school for me to go into practice."²⁶ Shaw in London who had clearly gone out of his way to facilitate his third year in Rome received Connell's decision with regret.²⁷

Connell returned to London and re-established contact with a fellow colonial student, Stewart Lloyd Thomson. Born in Melbourne in 1902, Thomson trained with JW Ashworth and studied at the Melbourne Technical College and the Melbourne University Atelier. He was commissioned to design a war memorial at Kyneton near Melbourne and travelled to London in 1924. Finalist for the Rome Scholarship, Tite Prize, Soane Medalion and Victory Scholarship, while studying at the University College Atelier, Thomson's path was closely matched with both Connell and Ward.²⁸ Connell and Thomson set up at 11 Mecklenburg Place in the heart of Bloomsbury, conveniently close to University College and Ashmole's office as the Yates Professor. While the first drawings for *High and Over*, dated June 1929, are signed Connell and Thomson, neither architect mentions the other in any known source and

²⁶ Connell to Smith. 29 December 1929.

²⁷ Shaw to Smith. 15 January 1929.

²⁸ Thomson "Form of Application for Admission as a Fellow" 1939.

their working relationship is therefore conjectural.²⁹ There was perhaps little that they could do, individually or together, as it was the height of the great depression and work for modernists was hard to find. Jock Connell recalled that Connell had failed to hold on to a major potential client in Sir Phillip Sassoon who had commissioned him to design a garden at his restored mansion house *Trent Park*.³⁰ Thomson only records that he began professional practice in 1929 on his ARIBA candidate's statement and made no claims for collaboration on *High and Over*.³¹ His first British commission, the house *St Raphael* in Hornchurch, London did not eventuate until 1932 by which time Connell had been rejoined by Basil Ward. Even so, Thomson can be counted as an early practitioner of the flat roofed thin walled reinforced concrete modern house in Britain and has been sadly lost from view in the surveys of the period. He is known, if at all, for *St Raphael* and *Castle Circus House* (1936), a highly advanced office building in Torquay. He went into partnership with Hector Corfiato after the war and together they

²⁹ Connell and Thomson *Proposed House at Amersham*.

³⁰ *Connell, Ward and Lucas* p 62.

³¹ Thomson "Form of Application for Admission as a Fellow" 1939.

designed the *Notre Dame de France* Catholic Church off London's Leicester Square. His brief association with Connell is further evidence of the colonial nexus that formed at the British schools of architecture after the Great War and had such great influence over the shape of British modernism.

Discussion of *High and Over* often focuses on its striking centralised form. Connell's initial design was later described by Ashmole as "an Elizabethan plan, E-shaped, the two projecting wings forming a courtyard which would be open to the south."³² The combination of hovering roof canopies, punched out slot windows and plain white walls epitomised the new architecture of the 1920s but these elements would have been equally assertive in the discarded first proposal. The most striking aspect of *High and Over* is its radial plan. The suggestion of the Y-plan appears to have come from Ashmole and was taken up by Connell who understood the potential of the 120 degree arrangement of the main parts of the building around a centralised hexagonal hub.³³ Reference has been made to the Edwardian free plan and

³² Ashmole *Bernard Ashmole* p 51.

³³ Ashmole *Bernard Ashmole* p 52.

British houses built with modified Y-plans.³⁴ It is possible that Connell was aware of these but more likely that he drew directly from classical Roman sources, particularly the novel geometries used in villas during the Hadrianic period, a subject that he had mastered while at Rome. An appealing notion to the modernist planner in Connell was that Roman geometry was used when it brought tangible practical advantages or when it was inherent in the nature of the design. A hexagon has the useful feature of containing the greatest area within the shortest perimeter. It may also be multiplied and composed into a regular pattern or subdivided into equilateral triangles. Hexagonal room shapes were incorporated into Roman baths and one particular example of hexagonal planning, the Sala Trilobata, adjacent to the Baths of Trajan might be considered as a model for the planning of *High and Over*.³⁵ In this instance, rooms coming off the central space were constrained in size by the length of the straight-line segment forming the perimeter of the hexagon. This set of proportions would not be effective for a plan that demanded an

appropriate scale relationship between the entrance hall of a modern house and its major rooms. Connell instead expanded the hexagon to define the outer walls and drew a double square starting from the future fountain spigot so that the spaces leading off were proportioned according to their function. The hall floor was laid with black marble cut into triangles and an illuminated circular glass fountain was set in the centre of a six-armed star. The larger hexagon was extended into an equilateral triangle that delineated the canopy over the front entrance and the shape of the stair tower. A circle exactly half the width of the hall was cut from the ceiling and allowed light from the stair tower to flood the internal space. Each wing housed a separate function, and circulation for the Ashmole family was via the direct route of the central hall and stair while servants were obliged to take the long way around through a complex arrangement of corridors and secondary stairs. Despite the understandable temptation to make the three-winged arrangement completely symmetrical, Connell could not contain the kitchen in the same wing as the dining room and this was pushed out into a single storey projection that adds an interesting imbalance to the plan. Connell's manipulation of the hexagon into a plan answering the Ashmole's functional

needs was both sophisticated and true to pragmatic Roman practice. Even so, the planning of *High and Over* was complicated by the nature of upper middle class existence in inter-war Britain where a house with space for live in staff was still common. If *High and Over* is anywhere Edwardian in concept, it is reflected in the complex arrangements of servant's rooms, stairs, passages and work room access that divides the spaces into distinct hierarchical orders.

Equal in interest to the internal planning of the house was the development of its garden. Connell was highly conscious of the natural landscape setting for *High and Over* and how it might relate to the hexagonal figure. A "green field" site – part of the farmlands of the Shardeloes Estate in rural Amersham – the land was elevated with a pleasant outlook over the Misbourne valley but had no established trees or structures. The only feature of significance was a depression formed by a disused chalk pit. The plan was arranged to have the pit lie between the two private wings of the house. The third wing containing the dining room and kitchen projected into the gentle rise behind. Terraces were built on two levels to manage the slope and these wrap the form of the house, lending

³⁴ Thistlewood and Heeley "Connell, Ward and Lucas" p 86.

³⁵ Jones *Principles of Roman Architecture* p 92.

a second level of geometric complexity to both house and garden. In this solid rooting of the house to the site, Connell's work differs markedly from Le Corbusier who was more concerned with the standardisation of his houses so that they could be set on their pilotis with minimal contact to the ground and on any type of site.

Effective analysis of this complex and multi-layered project relies on historical documents, descriptions and photographs now that the site has been subdivided and many of the original landscape features lost. Connell's interest in French modernist garden design is reflected in a drawing which presented a complete garden plan for the extensive grounds.³⁶ This extends an earlier plan prepared with the design of the house and which was well under way by the time *High and Over* was publicised in 1931. The garden close to the house was based on two equilateral triangles divided into terraced beds, one on the gentle slope rising to the left of the entrance and the other filling the steeper grade down to the chalk pit. These features strongly recalled Guévrékian's

garden at the Paris Exposition as well as his better known courtyard at the *Villa Noailles* at Hyères (1927), one of the few surviving modernist gardens and thus well recognised today.³⁷ Connell was on the Riviera in 1928 when the house, designed by Rob Mallet-Stevens, and garden were newly completed. The similar hilltop position and framing of the garden from the roof terrace makes comparison between the two projects highly tempting. Both gardens are heavily delineated using tall white concrete walls and borders to create strong contrasts between angular beds that are grassed and planted with roses in the case of *High and Over* and tiled and filled with round pebbles at Hyères. Connell's perspective drawing shows clipped shrubs adding a regular spherical feature that punctuates the descent, a device also used by Guévrékian. Three flights of steps were to lead down to a small reflecting pool and further on to a circular pool sheltered by a stand of trees. A long pergola extended the axis of the library wing while that most classical of English garden devices, a maze, filled in another triangular space above the rose garden. These features were linked to a rectangular "broad walk" lawn that ran on a

shallow 15-degree angle off the main axis towards the water tower at the top of the site where a large rectangular pool was constructed. Between the lawn and the pergola was a large vegetable garden divided into rectangular beds. An arrow-shaped lawn intersected the main drive to the house and a group of plantings that dropped steeply into the chalk pit and was in turn bisected by a path laid out with rectangular sections of box hedge. Plants were chosen for their architectural form and the juvenile Irish yews planted by Ashmole are visible in photographs taken of the site in 1931. These elements were connected by a serpentine path that wound through the site and finished at the far end of the broad walk that was protected by a hedge. Connell placed these features sparingly on the large 12-acre site and they were separated by large areas of rough mown grass. Much of this ambitious scheme was achieved. A fascinating aerial photograph taken in the mid-1930s shows Ashmole's indefatigable gardener George Marlow removing rocks and developing Connell's ambitious landscape plan.³⁸

³⁶ Connell and Thomson *House at Amersham for Bernard Ashmole*.

³⁷ Brown *The Modern Garden* p 38.

³⁸ Connell, *Ward and Lucas* p 26.

Also constructed by 1931 were the lodge – lived in by George Marlow and his wife May – the water tower and a generator house. These were set in a less formal relationship with the garden and the main building. The lodge, unpublished as a plan but photographed for an extensive article in *The Architect and Building News*, was a two storey cubic design with corner slot windows and a striking angled wall that sheltered a private courtyard from the roadway. Higher on the hill stood an astounding structure which resolved into a cylindrical water tank on a slender concrete pole combined with a pump house and fives court. This highly irregular structure caused the local authorities to balk but was forced on Ashmole due to the failure of the council to supply a water pipe sufficient to service the circular swimming pool.³⁹ The generator house continued the theme with a free-standing wall projecting towards the front of the site. The cubic form was cut through with ventilation slots and its abstract geometry effectively introduced the unfolding drama of the main structures, made more striking by the bareness of the hill on which they stood. Perhaps not satisfied by the act of building this impressive group or in an effort

³⁹ Ashmole *Bernard Ashmole* p 55.

to recoup some of the considerable expense, Ashmole approached Connell and Ward to develop a planned estate on the lower part of the site. Four houses were built on the slope leading up top the lodge with Ashmole's brother-in-law Charles de Peyer investing in the project.⁴⁰ Sites were laid out for another five houses but these remained unbuilt. The Sunhouses continued the formal logic of *High and Over*, being tall and with roof terraces on the third level, but were constructed with Connell, Ward and Lucas' newly developed monolithic reinforced concrete structural system. The thin folded paper quality of these houses with their characteristic rough rendering offered a more modernist, but less formally inventive image, than the parent buildings. Connell's isometric drawing characteristically shows the garden walls and vegetable garden that he envisaged accompanying these symbols of modernity.⁴¹

Connell's use of roof terraces, classical vistas from the three storey house itself and retaining walls to create exterior promenades is akin to French modernist Andre Lurçat whose *Maison Guggenbihl* had bequeathed

⁴⁰ Connell and Ward *High and Over Estate, Station Road, Amersham*.

⁴¹ *Connell, Ward and Lucas* p 27.

other details to *High and Over* including the roof canopies and bay window. Lurçat is now regarded as a minor figure in the pantheon of French modernists but his design philosophies on architecture and gardens were studied in Britain during the late 1920s.⁴² His dissenting views on Corbusean modernism emerged at the CIAM conference in 1929 where he questioned the theme of "The Subsistence Dwelling" by asking "Why a minimum when, socially, we should be aiming for a maximum?"⁴³ In his 1929 publication *Terrasses et Jardins*, he argues against living on the damp and unhealthy earth but instead to build towards the sky where the benefits of light and sun could be enjoyed from the roof terrace.⁴⁴ The height that is such a striking feature of *High and Over* meant that the garden was essentially composed to be seen from above with the roof terrace as a horizontal façade, rid of the clutter of chimneys and accoutrements of the urban house.

Connell's landscape plan for *High and Over* also reveals his interest in the disciplined but

⁴² Imbert *The Modernist Garden in France* p 185.

⁴³ Benton "André Lurçat, 1894-1970" p 98.

⁴⁴ Imbert *The Modernist Garden in France* p 188.

modern designs of Paul Vera (1888-1971) who was concerned to bridge the gap between the modern world, the classical French paysager with its geometrical beds and shaped plantings, and the naturalesque landscaped garden. According to Dorothée Imbert, Vera prescribed a "'vernacular modernism" that praised labour,"⁴⁵ a proposition that certainly describes Connell's plan and Ashmole's physical efforts to reshape the surroundings of *High and Over*. Vera's new formulation of the *jardin régulier* acknowledged labour, reflected in Connell's raising of the water tower to its prominence in the landscape plan and the positioning of the vegetable garden between the formal axes of the pergola and the broad walk. Tradition was not abandoned. These various garden rooms were served by the pergola and lawns edged by low hedges of box, controlled shrubs and tall clipped green walls, as were the neo-classical gardens of the past. Concrete was used as a modern substitute for stone masonry and Ashmole recounted that "He [Marlow] and I together cast several thousand square feet of deep concrete edges for the beds, and several thousand square feet of cement paving for the

paths."⁴⁶ The extension of the interior plan of *High and Over* into this heavily constructed mineral environment, occurring at various levels of abstraction, was intensely architectural in terms of space-time. Movement and physical activity of all types were celebrated. The fives court, regarded by some as a bizarre novelty, makes perfect sense in this context. Climbing to the brow of the hill, some 40 metres above the road, was rewarded by the sight of the field called the "velvet lawn" across the valley.⁴⁷ The most exciting vista was that from the top of the water tower, accessible by an internal ladder. This sightline took in the large circular pool that Ashmole and Marlowe excavated at the foot of the garden steps where the family swam and exercised. This vantage point also reinforced the two-dimensional nature of the modern garden, designed to be appreciated from the roof terrace as a formal geometrical pattern on the land. The plan both reveals Connell's observance of French trends in modernist garden design and the fragmented gestalt of the early modernist era when both nationalism and foreign influences were

barely contained in the rush to experiment with the new architecture.

Architectural historians have often felt the need to assert that modernism is the only acceptable narrative or description for what is in fact a more multi-layered grouping of positions and styles. It is clear that Connell's training and emergent approach to design favoured the axial symmetry of neo-classical planning that shaped other early British forays into Modernism including the highly formal designs of Thomas Tait for housing at the Crittal Metal Windows Silver End worker's estate carried out in 1927, well before *High and Over*. The same could be said for fellow New Zealander George Checkley's White House at Cambridge built in 1931 where a simplified Georgian entrance façade encloses a similarly static plan. While no doubt impressed by Le Corbusier's "domino" structural model and the free plan, Connell's conception remained firmly rooted both in the ground and in classical architectural tradition. Connell, more effectively than any British architect of his era, negotiated a thoroughly valid moderation between the European avant-garde and the neo-classical English country house with its cultural connections passing back through Palladio to the villas of

⁴⁵ Imbert *The Modernist Garden in France* p 73.

⁴⁶ Ashmole *Bernard Ashmole* p 59.

⁴⁷ Ashmole *Bernard Ashmole* p 59.

ancient Rome. This dualism has engendered two misunderstandings that are now deeply imbedded in the interpretation of *High and Over* – firstly, that that Connell's effort to bridge the difference between modernism and conservatism in the late 1920s was a compromise, and secondly, that the design was, relatively speaking, a failure owing to its conservatism. Connell's design certainly contains distinct modernist and conservative modes, but the piece-meal reading of the whole project in terms of disparate parts offers a flawed understanding of Connell's accomplishment. In her otherwise useful book *The Modern Garden*, Jane Brown asserts that "No plan survives for the house, nor does the approach garden itself, which was via a grass path of wide steps across a series of triangular terraces supported by white concrete block walling."⁴⁸ Such is the risk of research through looking at photographs where the complex reality of the environment is constrained by selective views. Similarly, the segmentation of Connell's career into what has been characterised as a flawed period of experimentation progressing later into a more "respectable" modernism resists a complete understanding of *High and Over* and the

richness of its conception as a bridge between classicism and modernism in a distinctly colonial gesture towards the new world and the old.

⁴⁸ Brown *The Modern Garden* p 70.

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