

Mr Jack Deeble interviewed by Professor Frank Fenner

1999, Australian Academy of Science

Fenner: The Academy was established by Royal Charter in February 1954, and already by 1955 Council had decided firmly that they needed a building of their own to give themselves a national identity. Jack, as I remember it, you were appointed in 1956.

Deeble: Yes, that's right.

What was the situation? How did you come into it?

I was working for the University of Melbourne and was approached by one of the Fellows there, Sir Leslie Martin, to see if I'd be interested in moving to Canberra, to the new Academy. And I decided to.

So you came up in 1956 and your period of working here as Assistant Secretary and then, as they called it, Executive Secretary, lasted right through the building of the Dome and for some years after that?

Yes. I was in at the beginning of the real work on the building – the building design, not only the building itself – and for the next 27 years.

Could you start by telling us something about the efforts to raise money. I think the Council took the view that they had to have some money in hand before they started getting building designs and so on.

Some of that was before I arrived. Several of the early Fellows were a bit sceptical, as I understand, about being able to raise significant amounts of money for a building, but Sir Mark Oliphant – Professor Oliphant, as he was then – surprised them by obtaining a couple of significant donations and from then on the money started to come in. Far from the full amount was available at the time it was necessary to let contracts, and it was necessary to obtain a bank loan of about £100,000 in order to be able to sign the contract. How that was to be repaid was not entirely clear to anybody, I think, at the time, but several years later our fairy godfather arrived and Mr Becker made us the donation, for the building, of £100,000. That followed a slightly earlier donation of £100,000 for the general purposes of the Academy. With the Becker gift, of course, the building was secured.

What backing did the Academy get for a loan of £100,000? That was a big loan.

Yes. When the donation list was fairly impressive, Oliphant went to see Menzies, the Prime Minister, to see whether the government would be willing to put in a significant donation. Menzies was his usual charming self but declined to put any money in. He took the view that the Academy was doing very well by itself and it should try a bit longer and a bit harder. However, when the crunch time came and the contract had to be signed, the government was willing to guarantee the bank loan, so that was a major contribution.

Yes, I'm sure it was. It's very nice to have your bank loan guaranteed by the government. Well, that's the funding. Now it comes to getting a design for the building. What can you tell us about that?

The first design that was given any airing was at, I think, the second annual meeting of the Academy, when the Treasurer of the day, Mr Marston, produced a rough sketch by a firm of architects that he was aware of, Musson, McKay and Potter. I think he intended those drawings simply to stimulate thought about the possibility of getting a building, of starting a project going, but one of the Fellows, Sir Otto Frankel, was absolutely horrified at the drawings themselves.

Well, he was really stimulated!

They were strictly Graeco-Roman in concept – pillars and all that sort of stuff – and Otto was absolutely horrified and thought that this wouldn't do at all. He stimulated the idea of seeking other designs, in fact having some sort of competition in designs so as to get something modern.

If I could just interrupt: Did the request for building plans and Marston's suggestion come before a site had been allocated?

Oh yes, long before there was a site. It was just...

Airy-fairy?

Very airy-fairy. It had no foundation in fact at all.

We'll come later to obtaining the site, then.

Otto Frankel had an interest in architecture and he also had an architectural friend in Melbourne, Oscar Bayne. He wrote Oscar to ask advice about whether the Academy might perhaps approach one of the famous international figures – like Gropius, he mentioned – or whether in Oscar's opinion we should go for an Australian. Well, Oscar was very strong on that point and said that he thought it would be a shame for Australia's Academy to be housed, however elegantly, in a work of genius by a foreign architect, and that Australia should do its best. In the event, of course, it did very well indeed.

The procedure was that Oliphant drew up a brief, one-page statement of the sort of accommodation that the Academy needed, and it was fairly modest accommodation. It just needed a conference room, an adjacent room for withdrawing from the conference – social occasions and so on – and a small suite of offices. He then wrote to half a dozen architects who had been selected after consultation with Oscar Bayne and the other officers of the Academy, and these people were invited to submit sketch designs, each for a fixed fee, what the architects called a quantum meruit fee. That is a fee roughly equivalent to the amount of work necessary to produce the drawings. In this way, it would be a competition in the layman's sense but not in the sense of the Institute of Architects' rules. They required that a competition had to have a committee to judge the competition which had a majority of architects on it. That really wasn't acceptable to the Academy, and Oliphant wrote and said so.

Unfortunately, the President of the Institute of Architects thought that the Academy was somehow part of the Australian National University, so he wrote a furious letter to the Vice-Chancellor of the

university, more or less inviting the Vice-Chancellor to discipline Professor Oliphant for having done this dreadful thing. However, the half dozen designs were obtained. Originally, there were only five, but a local Canberra architect heard about the competition and so he wrote to Oliphant and said he thought that it was a shame there was no local boy being given a chance, and he was invited to submit drawings too. So that made a total of six.

Council appointed a building design committee, and it was arranged that that committee would meet in Adelaide, partly because Mr Marston, who was part of the committee, wasn't well and couldn't comfortably travel. So the committee met in Adelaide, at Marston's laboratories in the CSIRO Division of General Nutrition. It was arranged that the architects would send their drawings directly to Adelaide by a given date, and Oscar and I went over a day before the meeting, unwrapped all the entries, and set them up around a room that Marston had provided so that in the morning, when the committee members arrived, they all filed in and everybody saw everything for the first time.

It happened that Grounds' drawings were the first that they looked at, just on the left of the doorway as they came in. There was a sort of universal reaction of, 'Oh, my God! Troglodytes!'

Excuse me. Who is Grounds?

Grounds is the eventually successful architect.

Yes, but where was he from and what firm did he belong to?

He was part of a partnership called Grounds, Romberg and Boyd, of Melbourne. That partnership worked in such a way that, although they had common services for their company, each of the architects individually took charge of their own project.

One of those architects, Robin Boyd, designed my house.

Yes, I remember that now. The committee gradually moved round the room, looking at all the designs, but within 20 minutes, despite the exclamations on first catching sight of the Grounds' drawings, they were all clustered round that drawing and that drawing only. Eventually Otto Frankel, who was actually in the chair for the meeting – Oliphant had asked him to chair the meeting – had to call them to order so that they could systematically look at all the drawings and have Oscar Bayne explain any particular architectural points about them one by one. That was done, and in summing up I remember Oscar describing each one with a sort of short phrase. He described one as 'a gentlemanly 1934 design' and another one as 'an architect school fantasy', but turning to the Grounds' design he said, 'Or pure genius.'

I think one of the things that persuaded the committee, as much as anything else, was the fact that Grounds provided the accommodation asked for – no more, no less. All the others, without exception, provided a building about twice the size, with all sorts of bits and pieces, bells and whistles, that hadn't been asked for. Quite aside from the striking appearance of the building, the fact that he had stuck so closely to the brief was one of the big features, and by the end of the day the committee was quite unanimous in recommending the Roy Grounds' design. But all of them were afraid of what their colleagues on Council would say. They felt that they weren't conservative themselves but all the rest of the Council was. But in the event that wasn't a problem. Council unanimously accepted the design and the detailed development of it proceeded from there.

And that was the only meeting of the building design committee?

Yes. That was a special committee put together just to look at the drawings. It was fairly large – I think there were about seven or eight people involved. There were two from Adelaide, Marston and J G Wood, who was an Adelaide person; the four officers of the Academy at the time, who were Oliphant, Sunderland and Cherry – Sunderland was Secretary, Biological Sciences; Cherry was Secretary, Physical Sciences – and of course Bayne.

Marston himself was an officer; he was Treasurer.

And Otto Frankel, of course. But then, when Council just a week later accepted the design, at the same time they appointed a building committee to develop the design and to carry the project through. That only had three people on it: Oliphant, Frankel and Sunderland.

Where did it go from there?

There was eight or nine months' hard work by Grounds and his office, developing the detail of the building. And there were a few questions, but not too many, to the building committee from Grounds, clarifying points or asking for guidance.

One of the interesting aspects of that period was the way in which Oliphant and Grounds had to learn to work together, if I can put it that way. They were both towering personalities, very much used to getting their own way. Oliphant was prone to suggest shifting the position of a wall by six inches or a foot, and Grounds wouldn't let him do that. He said, 'Tell me what you want to do in that space that you can't do, and I'll decide on the architectural solution.' It took a very short time, actually, for both of them to adjust and to concede that one knew about the function and the other knew about the architecture and the detail. And it worked out extremely well. As a matter of fact, a year or so later I remember Roy Grounds saying to me that in his view a great building was the product of a good client and a good architect – one couldn't do it without the other. I think that was very true with this building.

In the meantime there had to be somewhere for the building to be built. There had to be a site.

Yes. Of course, that came before this period.

After the Adelaide meeting?

No, before the Adelaide meeting. The site was obtained before the drawings were called for, so that the architects knew what site they were designing for. Indeed, Roy Grounds always said that the circular shape of this building was much influenced by the semicircular shape of the plot of land that it was going on.

At that time there were no separate planning authorities in Canberra. The land planning was done by an office of the Department of the Interior and it was a question of negotiating available sites. There were various suggestions made from time to time. One was on a tongue of land just across the road from here. Another was what is now part of the clover-leaf approach to Commonwealth Avenue Bridge. The

Academy would have had a road right round it if it had been built there. But eventually this site in Acton...

There was one other that I remember. That was where the Canadian High Commission building is now, on Commonwealth Avenue.

Yes, there was a suggestion that it be on Commonwealth Avenue at one stage. But eventually this site, adjacent to what was then called Beauchamp House, was chosen. It was conveniently close to the university but not in the same grounds.

Not part of it, no.

As I say, its shape in fact influenced Grounds' design.

Okay, we've got the site, we've got the building plan. Now we have to go out to contract. Or were there things that happened before that?

No. Once Grounds had finished his detailed designing... I might say that his plans were absolutely meticulous, and his book of specifications is an inch thick. He specified everything, and when the building actually started the builders quickly came to realise that they weren't just words on paper: he really meant every word he used. And there are one or two anecdotes to reinforce that view.

Grounds recommended that only a handful of contractors be invited to tender, substantial-sized companies that he was confident would be able to handle the job. That was partly, of course, because the dome structure that he had designed was unique in the world and therefore it was going to be a fairly experimental operation. Four firms were invited, and they were all invited to tender on the basis either of a sprayed concrete dome or placed concrete. I remember that the two top tenders had a cross-over in price between the two methods of construction – one was cheaper in one way and the other was cheaper in the other way. But after some deliberation, Civil & Civic Constructions were engaged, and did a magnificent job.

Dusseldorp was in charge at that time, was he?

Yes. He was the managing director, I think. He was certainly the top man, anyway. He distinguished himself not only by having the building finished a month early – or maybe it was longer than a month early; it was certainly well before the scheduled completion time. He also, on the opening day – where of course he was a guest – presented the Academy with a cheque for £1000.

A nice gesture.

It was a nice gesture, yes. It's not many builders who are willing to do that sort of thing. But of course even at that stage, at the opening of the building, it had become a tremendous talking point, a feature of Canberra. It was much talked about all over the place, and was probably influential in getting Civil & Civic subsequent major jobs.

Between starting and finishing there were a number of important events, such as the laying of the foundation stone.

Yes. The sequence of events for the building was that the interior of the building – the floors and supporting walls – were built first, in the traditional fashion. The basement was dug, the first floor slab was laid, structural concrete walls were raised, and the second floor slab was put on.

Before the dome was put up?

Before the dome was started – in fact, before anything else, before the moat was done. Then, after that structure was done, the moat was built, section by section. The moat is extremely thick. It is a major structural member because it is the moat that holds the dome up. It is the ring beam that takes the thrust of the dome. If it hadn't been filled with water, there would still have had to be as much concrete and steel to do the structural job.

Then after the moat was built the dome started. The arches were done one at a time, with formwork both inside and out, slanted to the right angle and with the right curve. The builders moved round, arch by arch, until the 16 of them had been done and the circle completed. They went up to about where the current curtain wall around the building is, and there was one interesting incident during that time. In order to get the measurements for the arches right, a steel pole was erected in the precise centre of the building, guyed up with steel wires, and it had a metal collar on it to which a builders tape was fastened. All the measurements for placing the arches were taken from that central point and by an angle around.

Perhaps I should explain that an arch, once poured with concrete, had to be left for a while to cure sufficiently for the shuttering to be taken off and moved round to the next position. When that was done with one arch beside what is now the kitchen and the measurements were made to set up the next arch, it was discovered that unfortunately the previously poured arch was about six inches out of position. The reason was that the tape fastened to the central pole had broken and the foreman builder, without thinking, had simply fastened his own tape to the collar – not remembering to allow for the six inches of the tongue that was on the collar to which the tape was fixed. A piece had been cut off the original tape to allow for that.

So that arch had to be demolished. It normally took about three days to set up the reinforcing for an arch and pour it. It took about three weeks to demolish it, in order to move it round.

They were very smart. They picked up the time by starting at the other end of the circle and starting to build arches around the other side. I think that was the only real mistake that was made during the building process.

I mentioned Grounds' care of detail. Inside the building he had specified brickwork for some of the walls, and surprisingly to the brickies, he had specified that the joints of the brickwork should be struck clean and not indented. He had also been very clear as to how the bricks had to be selected. He had loads of bricks delivered on site and they all had to be hand-selected. He had made a selection of the first load, and he picked two bricks and said to the brickie, 'Nothing darker than this; nothing lighter than that. No bar marks, no blemishes.'

The brickie put his hand out to take the samples and Roy said, 'No, cut them in half. I'll keep half and you keep half.' So he was very careful that the bricks were matched and struck. When asked about this, why he wanted these struck joints, he said, 'Because we are designing a maintenance-free building.' And if you look at a brick wall, after some years the dust collects in the little groove in the mortar. He said, 'With the struck joints it won't.'

Yes, I remember him pressing for a maintenance-free building.

Yes, and all the finishes. In fact, sitting in the building now, 40 years later, it might have been built yesterday. The anodised aluminium, the terrazzo flooring, the timber walls and the timber used for the wall of the conference room – they all look as good as new.

Yes, that's true.

Roy had been so careful instructing the brickies about the bricks when he made his first visit to Canberra. The first lot was in fact the walls of the Council room, and he had said, 'Just do that and I'll come and have a look at it.' He came fairly frequently, of course, often once a week. Anyway, he arrived on this occasion and everybody was on tenterhooks to see what he would say about the brickwork. He walked into the Council room with the retinue behind him – the builder and the foreman and the brickies and everybody – and he looked round and he said, 'Beautiful. Absolutely beautiful.' And everybody heaved a sigh of relief.

Then he said, 'Such a pity it's got to come down.' Everybody looked stunned, and he explained that his specifications provided that light switches and doorknobs throughout the entire building were all at precisely the same height – waist height, not nose height, which was a common practice of the day. And the hole that had been left in the brickwork for the light switch was in the wrong place. He insisted that the brickwork come down to that level so that the hole could be rectified. After that, people read the specifications with great zeal!

Then there was the suggestion, once the first floor slab had been laid and we were coming up to the 1958 meeting of the Academy, that it would be a good time to set a foundation stone. One of the Fellows, the deputy director at Mount Stromlo Observatory, remembered that there was a large lump of granite that had been discarded by the observatory some years previously when the Great Melbourne Telescope had been moved from Melbourne to Mount Stromlo. The granite pier of this telescope hadn't been needed and had just been backed down the road on a truck and pushed over the edge. He suggested that it might have some historical, scientific significance and so Roy and I went up to Mount Stromlo to have a look at this piece of stone. Of course, everybody who had discussed it until then had the thought that you would just cut a piece off this large chunk of granite and have the traditional sort of foundation stone. But Roy paced around it and looked at it from several angles, and he said to me, 'I think we'll put it in just as it is.'

This huge chunk of granite happened to have an oblique face on it that would be suitable for inscription, and with great trouble, with the necessary machinery, the piece of granite was taken to the mason at Queanbeyan. Satrapa, his name was. He had his instructions from Grounds: merely to polish off that sloping face – not to cut it so that it was perfect, because it had a chip out of one side of it; not to touch it up so that the vein running through it was filled up; just clean it, polish that face and put the

inscription on that face. Satrapa was an emotional Italian, and he wept, absolutely wept, 'Mr Grounds, I can't do it.' But eventually he was persuaded just to do it that way.

When it came to a ceremony for setting the stone, there was no question of just having a curtain over it. Grounds decided that the Prime Minister, who was to do the honours, would actually set the stone. So he had this huge stone slung in a special cradle, hung from a builders hoist. He gave the Prime Minister a pair of builders gloves and made him lower the stone onto a pad of cement that the builder had put there. So the stone was laid, not set. And it was quite unique.

Then we've got to get to the stage from the arches up to the top of the roof.

Once the series of arches had been built – they were about three or four inches thick at their top, and a couple of feet thick at the bottom, where they rested on the special nibs in the moat – then came the task of building the rest of the dome. A wooden formwork dome was built and the rest was poured in virtually one pour. By the time it got up to that height, the slope was sufficient simply to lay the concrete on, provided it was of the right – I think they used to call it 'slump', the right stickability.

Consistency.

Yes, consistency. And that's how the dome was completed.

But during the whole of this dome construction period there was a forest of steel supports resting on the floor slabs inside the building, supporting the dome. When it came time to take those away, the concrete having set, it was known that the dome would deflect. So a system was worked out so that the supports were taken away from the centre of the dome, gradually working outwards. I was with Roy up on the slab on the second floor when the group of supports in the centre of the dome were taken away, and Roy dashed out to some supports that were about two-thirds of the way out from the centre of the dome, and he said, 'If the calculations are right, this should be loose.' And he seized a support and it came away in his hand. The dome bulged; as the centre was released, it dropped and there was a bulge in the dome which made the supports at that point come loose. And it all worked.

The dome deflected quite a bit, and with diurnal changes in temperature, which are high in Canberra, there is a big change between the night-time temperatures and daytime temperatures, so that the dome is all the time rising and falling by quite a few centimetres. That is the reason that none of the internal structure of the building touches the dome. It's all free of the dome by one device or another, so that the dome is free to move.

Then, of course, there was the task of covering the dome. There was some discussion about how this should be done, how it should be organised. Grounds recommended that instead of him trying to design the copper covering of the dome, we should ask Wunderlichs, the firm in Australia that had over 100 years' experience of copper roofs, to both design and fix the copper. And so that was done. During that early discussion stage there was an amusing interlude when some thought was given to the possibility of gold-plating the copper. It didn't get very far with the building committee, but Grounds had taken it to the point of finding out whether it was feasible, and indeed it was feasible. But that was dismissed.

The copper covering became a source of some problems in the future. It wasn't possible to put any sort of bituminous coating on the concrete under the copper because of the slope: in 50 years the bitumen would all be in the moat. So the copper had to be relied upon to be waterproof, and unfortunately it wasn't – and isn't. This is my theory. The sheets of copper, the tiles of copper, are all joined together with a double fold. If you think about the amount of copper that accumulates at the corners, where two double-fold joints cross, you will see that it was necessary for the plumbers who were doing the job to cut some of those layers out in order that the fold would sit flat. My view is that the plumbers were a little enthusiastic and cut rather more out, and there are therefore pinholes through the corners of some of the joints and that's where the water gets in.

At the last minute, when the last part of the dome was being poured, it was decided to put a water sprinkler at the top of the dome. A pump was made up and an ordinary large garden sprinkler was put up there. That was not, as some people thought, to cool the building, but simply to make the copper more frequently wet and therefore turn green more quickly. After a time, when it was realised that the leaks were there to stay, the spray was taken away. But there is just the faintest green patina on the top of it now, and it was always understood that it would take a long time to develop. Thought was given to the possibility of artificially...

Treating the copper, essentially, with chemicals.

Treating it to make it go green quicker, but no confidence was felt in the methods. It was felt that they were likely to produce flakiness and streakiness, so it was left to nature.

So now we've got the building, with the dome complete, but we have to put up certain interior separations.

Yes. The choice by Grounds of timber and brick for the walls – and glass and aluminium for the external wall – involved choosing what sort of timber. I've spoken about the bricks. With timber, if you paint or varnish it, you're into maintenance problems. So Grounds chose a light timber, Eucalyptus regnans, and in fact it is said that he went to the forest in Tasmania and chose the trees! Whether that's true or not I don't know, but certainly some beautiful trees were milled. For instance, the timber walls of the Wark Theatre are made of timber all cut from single lengths. There are no joins in those vertical pieces of timber.

The maintenance was dealt with by a technique that Grounds had developed for himself, for some of the houses that he had built previously. The raw timber is painted with white undercoat and that is then wiped off; then it is painted with clear varnish and that is rubbed back to the timber; and that process is done twice. That results in a surface which does not go deep yellow as Eucalyptus regnans usually does over time, but retains its pale appearance. Indeed, looking at it now, 40 years later, it hasn't yellowed at all. It has retained its colour beautifully. Again Roy had trouble with the foreman painter, about making sure he understood what he meant. Roy eventually took the paintbrush and the thinners rag himself and demonstrated, because the painter simply didn't believe that he meant what he said. But that was all done.

In the conference chamber there was very great stress laid by the building committee on the question of acoustics. It was felt that if the Academy of Science couldn't get it right, then nobody could. The reputation of the Academy hung on having a conference chamber where the acoustics were perfect. I

might say that was partly because Wilson Hall, in the University of Melbourne, had only just been rebuilt and the acoustics there were appalling. So the academic community was seized with the need to spend some time and energy on getting the acoustics right.

It happened that Robin Boyd was spending a six-month sabbatical with a firm of acoustical engineers in Boston— Bolt, Beranek and Newman. Consequently he was in a very good position to get advice, frequently over the teacups, and the resulting design was really wonderful. The acoustics in the hall are very good indeed. The elements of it are that there is a crescent-shaped chamber behind the timber wall that has got baffles in it, set at odd, irregular angles. The timber wall is made up of battens of timber with spaces between them, so that there is some reflection from the face of the batten and some of the sound goes through the gap, reflects off the baffles behind and is reflected randomly around the room. The other element of the acoustics is the circular discs hung from the dome. They are of varying diameters at varying heights, and so again the reflection from those is random.

You could stand anywhere in the hall and speak in an ordinary speaking tone, and be heard anywhere else in the hall. It's not merely from the dais to the body of the hall or vice versa; it's anywhere to anywhere. So the time spent in getting the acoustics right was well spent.

But there was a spin-off from that acoustical treatment that nobody foresaw. That is that the battens around the wall of the conference room were randomly spaced— within limits, but they weren't all uniform; there were some gaps bigger than others between the battens. Because of the appearance to people sitting in the hall of dark and light stripes around the hall, a physiological condition called nystagmus developed and quite a number of people couldn't sit in the hall. They became physically nauseated by this pattern.

I remember that.

That caused considerable problems for a while, until one of the Fellows working in the John Curtin School...

In Eccles' department, I think.

In Sir John Eccles' department Dr Victor McFarlane suggested that a way to get over the problem would be to put some darkening on the face of the batten and to put some strings covering the gaps, so as to produce almost an optical uniformity but still allow the sound to pass through to the baffles behind. That in fact was done, and it worked. McFarlane published a paper on it, so hopefully nobody else will make the same mistake.

Actually, I remember standing in the middle of the hall, when the dome was up but nothing else was up, and just talking as loudly as I am now, and the echoes kept going for about half a minute!

Yes. When the acoustics were under discussion, Roy came to the building committee and said, 'Now, these acoustics are designed for the human voice. Do you want to play music there, for instance?' Otto in particular said, 'Oh yes, that would be a good idea.'

I can imagine.

But Roy said, 'If you do, I've got to compromise the acoustics for the voice.' So the committee unanimously said, 'Forget about the music. Voice only.' The reason is that the reverberation time is so short. If you stand in the middle of the room and you clap your hands, quite contrary to the effect when it was just the naked dome, the sound stops dead. But it is excellent for the voice. Of course, in more recent times speakers have become so used to electronic aids that they now have got no way of projecting their voices or speaking in a reasonably loud voice.

Fortunately some people can, and that relieves the burden of those people who carry microphones up and down the aisles.

Yes, that's right. Sir William Slim opened the building, as Governor-General at the time, and he had a sneak preview a few days beforehand. When he came, Sir Mark was with him. They went into the hall and the seats were only just being installed – screwed into place. Under each seat there is a hole cut in the floor for return ventilation, and in going into the room Slim nearly stepped in one of these holes. Oliphant guided him round it. Then, on the great day, when he was to open it, Oliphant came in with him through the door and the room was jam-packed full of people. We had chairs everywhere and the gallery was full; we had about 250 people, where it was intended for 150. And they were all dead silent for the great man. Slim turned to Oliphant and, thinking that he was talking sotto voce, said, 'I hope you've got that bloody hole covered up!' Of course every soul in the place heard him because the acoustics were so good.

What about the other furnishings – the movable furniture and so on?

All the movable furniture except the chairs we are sitting in was designed by Fred Ward, of the design department at the Australian National University. They were all made of blackwood and they have also stood the test of time; they are still as good today as they were when they were first built. These chairs were made by a firm in Melbourne, I regret to say copying pretty closely a Swedish design. They too have stood the test of time and they're beautiful chairs. As a matter of fact, Roy and his wife Betty and I spent the night before the opening arranging the furniture in what was then called the Fellows Room, and sat in the moonlight and shared a bottle of wine.

Betty Grounds made a couple of contributions to the building too. She was a partner in a firm of interior designers, and on a visit to Hong Kong she saw three lamps which she thought would go beautifully in the Fellows Room at the Academy. So she bought them. But when she came home, Roy got on his high horse and said she had no authority to buy them, and he didn't like them anyway, and they weren't going to go in. So Betty said haughtily, 'Well, I shall donate them to the Academy,' which she promptly did and they have been here ever since.

So that's how they came. I knew they came from the Grounds; I didn't know that was the way they came.

Yes, that's the way they came. Betty Grounds also bought, for the kitchen, our cups and saucers, knives and forks, and so on. The cutlery was Genser stainless steel from Sweden, beautiful stuff, and would you believe that the china was Wedgwood? It was perfect for the Academy building, because it was a design that had a grey external cover – the cups were grey on the outside and white inside, and the plates were grey with a white rim. It is a colour that Wedgwood no longer makes, because of the difficulty of reproducing the colour. When we wanted some replacements, they were a slightly different grey. Lord Wedgwood made a visit to Australia in recent years, and he wanted to come and have a look at the

Academy of Science, because as far as he knew it was the only place in the world that had chosen Wedgwood as institutional ware. He was delighted to see it.

It must be used over in Ian Potter House now.

Regrettably, it's not used at all, I believe.

Just not enough surviving?

I think there's one cup. I made an inquiry the other day to ask about it, and there might be a few pieces around, but I think it's gone the way of all good crockery.

Are there other aspects you can think of, that you'd like to discuss?

Once the building was up and functioning, it became a hallmark of Canberra and was used in tourist literature. Television was just starting up in Canberra in those days and the television station chose the Academy building as its recognition signal. There was a newspaper that came out with the Academy, Parliament House and the War Memorial, as the major buildings in Canberra, on its masthead.

That would be Old Parliament House?

Old Parliament House, yes. Tom Cherry, the President of the Academy who succeeded Jack Eccles, said that the building placed the Academy on the map – literally. There is no doubt, I think, that recognition of the Academy as an institution, as well as a building, resulted from us having the courage to put up a building of this sort, and it has done a lot for the Academy's image.

When it came to the Academy seeking a Grant of Arms, I was in London in 1961 spending some time at the office of the Royal Society and I took the opportunity to go to the College of Heralds to discuss the possibility of a Grant of Arms. With some trepidation I suggested the possibility that a representation of the building might be the major charge on the arms, and the Herald with whom I was discussing this was absolutely delighted. He said, 'It'll be the revival of an heraldic practice 400 or 500 years old, when bearers of arms frequently had representations of their castle siege on their arms.' So there was not the slightest trouble in getting the Academy building, despite its futuristic appearance, as the major charge on the arms. Again, the Academy has used that arms as its publishing logo, so the building has become...

Inseparable from the Academy of Science.

Inseparable from the institution.

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