

After five weeks at sea, Romberg's first experience of Australia was a stroll through the small town of Port Pirie which was permanently bathed in the sulphur coloured haze issuing from the lead works surrounding its harbour. As foreigners in a foreign land, Romberg's breeches, the latest in European fashion, drew some astonished looks from the locals, while his fellow passengers were amazed at the abundance of tropical fruit available in the local store. 'Home' however was never far from their minds as the newspapers were reporting the growing tension around the occupation of the former Czechoslovakia by German armed forces.

A tour of the harbour and lead works gave the passengers insight into what Australia held in store; what Romberg described as a common attitude: 'Everything in Australia is best, biggest or most beautiful in the world, or at least the southern hemisphere'.<sup>1</sup>

On 25 September 1938 the *Mosel* arrived in Adelaide, where Romberg was met by Dr Stratmann, a fellow passenger who had disembarked at Port Pirie. An Australian, Stratmann's father had emigrated from Germany some fifty years before. They took in the view of Adelaide from a nearby hill where, Romberg remarked: 'I noticed the endless lines of straight roads. Obviously the city had been designed on the drawing board, not grown haphazardly as so many in Europe'.<sup>2</sup> Returning to the *Mosel*, he was met by his fellow passengers who had taken the opportunity to visit the local synagogue where they had commemorated the Jewish New Year.

On Tuesday 27 September 1938 the *Mosel* followed the coast towards Melbourne, during which the boat was hit by heavy swells and icy winds. Although passengers stayed calm, singing German songs: 'a final goodbye to the past',<sup>3</sup> Romberg was aware that all remained preoccupied with the uncertain future of their homelands and plans for starting a new life in Australia. The following morning the *Mosel* travelled up the Yarra River to dock. Romberg disembarked with several other passengers who were dubious about the risk of continuing on an identifiably German ship.

From the port, Romberg was given a car ride to Flinders Street Station, in the heart of Melbourne's central business district, by a passing delivery man who made small talk about the impending War and the rise of Hitler. At the Station, he recalls seeing 'extra' editions of the newspapers reporting on the attempts by Britain, Italy and France to

negotiate Germany's continued occupation of the Sudetenland. Following negotiations, Germany recalled all ships, which would include the *Mosel*. Any passengers remaining on board would now be on their way back to Germany.

Having abandoned his hat at the Station as it identified him as a foreigner, but retaining his satchel the loss of which would have been too great a sacrifice, Romberg found accommodation in a rooming house in walkside St Kilda. With satchel in hand he walked from St Kilda into the city to call on his connection at the State Electricity Commission (SEC). Passing the Shrine of Remembrance and walking over Princes Bridge, he remembered the Victorian embellishment of the surrounding city made his satchel and the modern architecture it contained rather heavy.

Although not informed of Romberg's journey, the Chief Architect and the Chief Engineer of the SEC agreed to see him. The Chief Engineer appeared, at the least, half convinced of his abilities by the nude life drawings that had been included in the portfolio, but was ultimately dismissive of his architectural talents. Nevertheless, the Chief Architect encouraged him to submit a job application, but, perhaps out of misguided kindness, failed to inform Romberg that foreigners were disqualified from working within state authorities. Nothing came of his application irrespective of Romberg's academic and personal credentials and appealing nudes. Operating on a lead from the Chief Architect that Canberra offered vacancies Romberg departed for the national capital in mid-October 1938.

Before leaving he attended the Caulfield Cup horse race with his date, Evonne, the niece of a fellow guest at the rooming house, who had expressed distress at his lack of horse knowledge. While Romberg recognised that 'knowing about horses was part of the Australian way of life'<sup>4</sup> he admitted that betting improved the experience. One 'punt' was lucky enough to win a sizeable return, enabling them to celebrate at the St Kilda fun fair, Luna Park. Over the following fortnight Romberg visited Sydney and Canberra seeking work without success as the rules governing foreign workers applied.

On his return to Melbourne Romberg soon found a job with one of Australia's leading architectural firms, Stephenson and Turner which employed approximately forty architects plus technical staff. Amiable and social, he rapidly settled into his

new life in the busy practice and made friends.<sup>5</sup> At the same time Verena Sulzer, a fellow-student from ETH-Z, arrived in Melbourne and she and Romberg married. The chain smoking Verena was no shrinking violet, evidenced by her later actions in negotiations with a neighbour over a dispute about a shared driveway. Interestingly, Verena procured cigarettes from Justus Jorgensen who established the artists' colony, Montsalvat, in the bushland of Eltham.<sup>6</sup> In May 1939, Verena gave birth to a daughter Barbara. Sons, Thomas and Douglas, followed in 1940 and 1942 respectively, and their youngest daughter Irene in 1944. Hugo Leipziger, a fellow architect at Stephenson and Turner and fellow German who was about to leave for America, offered the Rombergs his furniture with which they furnished their first flat in Best Overend's Cairo apartments on Nicholson Street, opposite Carlton Gardens.

Although Romberg had some experience in practice, he was at a disadvantage when it came to his command of English, but had nonetheless decided from the beginning that both Verena and he would only speak English. In his memoirs, Romberg states adamantly: 'I was determined that the switch to our new homeland should be complete'.<sup>7</sup> Hence none of their children learnt German. The use of the imperial measurement system and unfamiliarity with the Australian construction industry were also early impediments, but encouraged by the firm and the social contact among his peers, he quickly mastered the new environment.

Impressed by the confidence of his portfolio, Stephenson and Turner made Romberg Job Captain for the Australian Pavilion at the 1939 New Zealand Centennial Exhibition at Rongotai on the Wellington foreshore. While the overall design was evidently by Stephenson, Romberg's contribution drew on his earlier work in the practice of Otto Salvisberg, including the design of the staircase in the Hoffman-La Roche office complex in Basel. However, in the prevailing political environment Romberg's German nationality prevented him from supervising the building's construction in New Zealand. For his efforts, he earned the appreciation of his colleagues George Philip, the Chief Draughtsman who observed the construction on behalf of the firm, and Mickey Morton who was responsible for the hand renderings of the Pavilion. Morton and Philips were best men at Romberg and Verena's wedding.

Romberg's work on the Australian Pavilion also earned the appreciation of Stephenson, who, on observing the construction of the main staircase in Wellington wrote to him: 'The staircase will look fine, and you were quite right in insisting that there should be no landing in its height'.<sup>8</sup> Romberg was offered a raise, and in appreciation he offered an introduction to Otto Salvisberg when Stephenson was next in Europe. Within six months of arriving in Australia Romberg had begun to make his mark on its architecture.

Endnotes

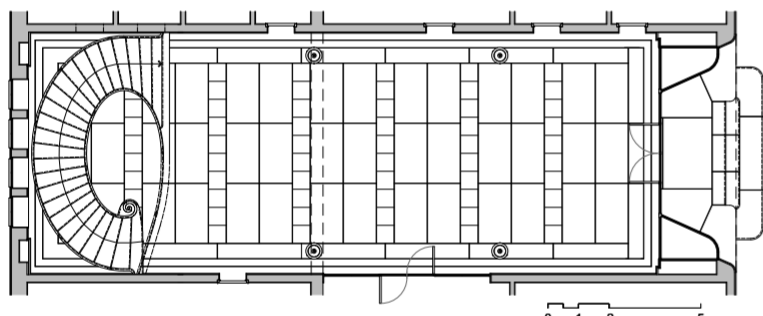
- 1 Frederick Romberg, 'Before Gromboyd: an architectural history', Vol 1, 1986, typescript, Romberg Collection, RMIT Design Archives, 132.
- 2 Romberg, 'Before Gromboyd: an architectural history', 135.
- 3 Romberg, 'Before Gromboyd: an architectural history', 136.
- 4 Romberg, 'Before Gromboyd: an architectural history', 149.
- 5 Stephenson and Turner had been effective since 1937, but was established from the dissolution of the architectural partnership of Arthur Stephenson and Hayman Meldrum which had been in operation since 1921. The Melbourne office was led by Stephenson while Donald Turner led the Sydney office.
- 6 Jorgensen was also a qualified draftsman having been articled at young age to his uncle the architect Robert Schreiber.
- 7 Romberg, 'Before Gromboyd: an architectural history', 161.
- 8 Romberg, 'Before Gromboyd: an architectural history', 160a.



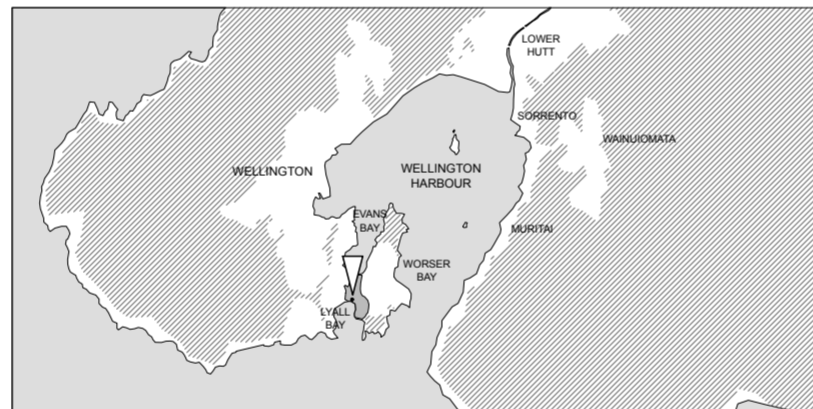
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Frederick Romberg: an architectural survey is supported through funding from the Australian Government's Your Community Heritage Program.

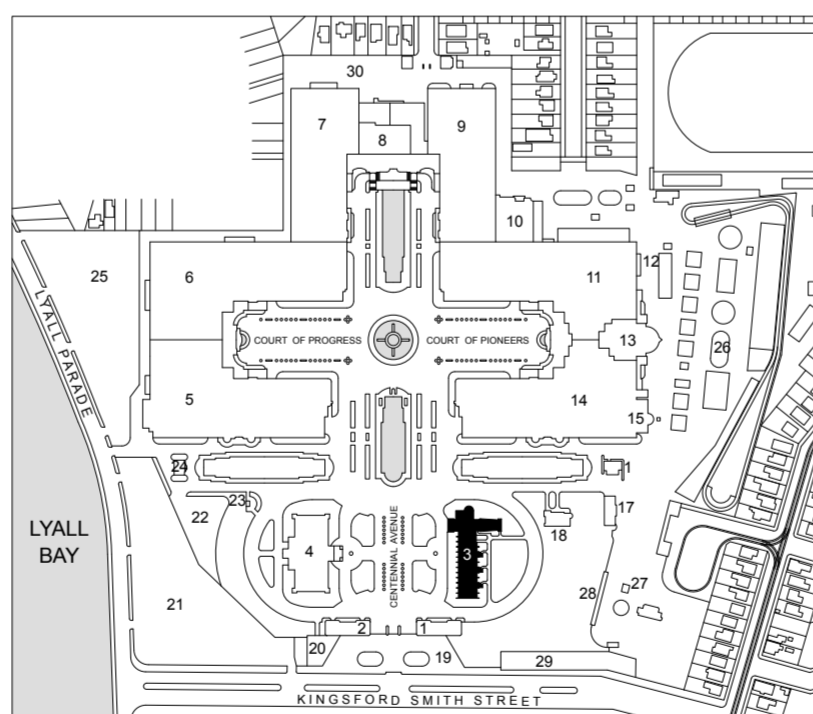
STEPHENSON AND TURNER, AUSTRALIAN PAVILION, 1939 NEW ZEALAND CENTENNIAL EXHIBITION, RONGOTAI, (DEMOLISHED) Drawings by Michael Spooner



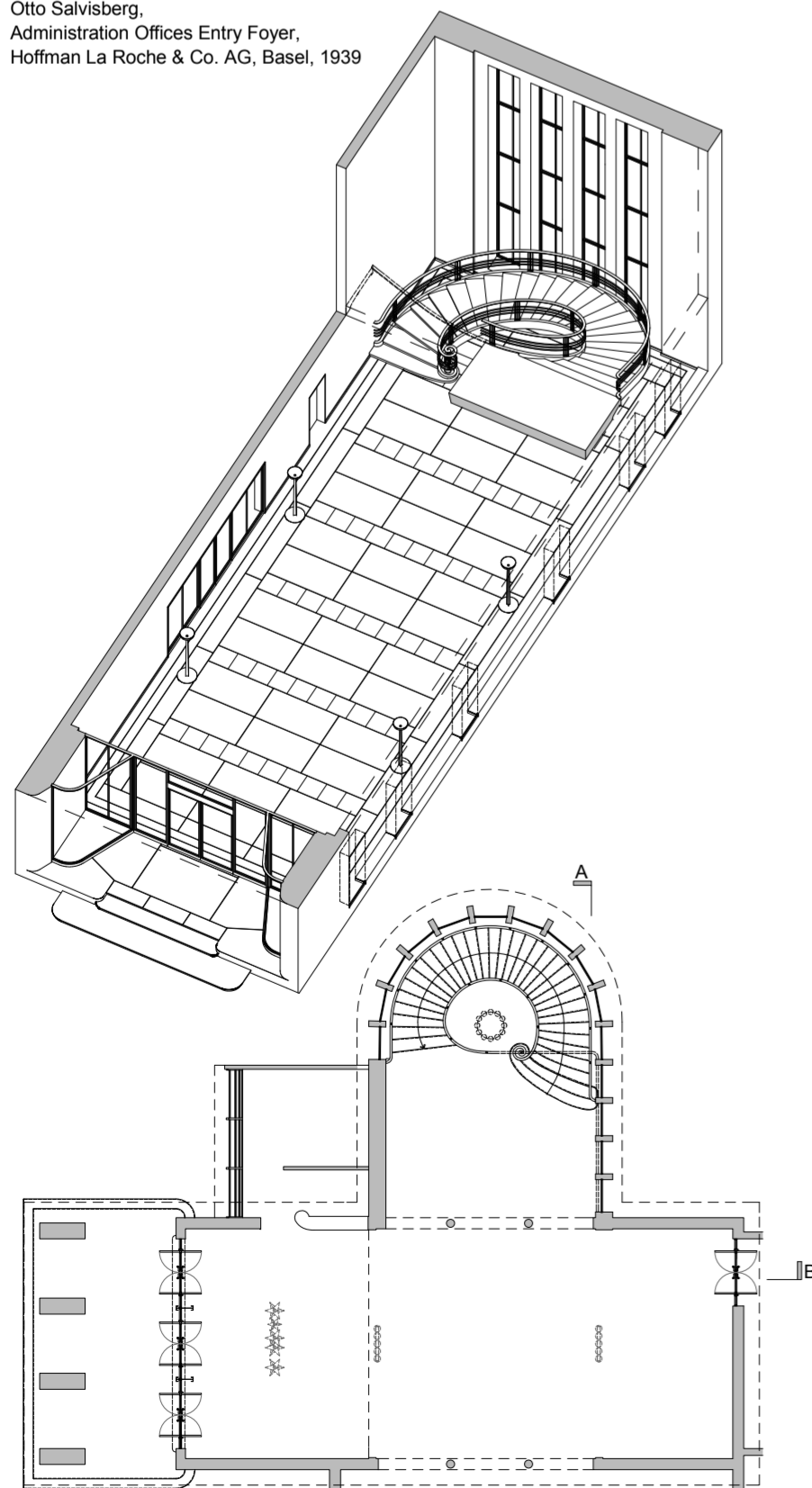
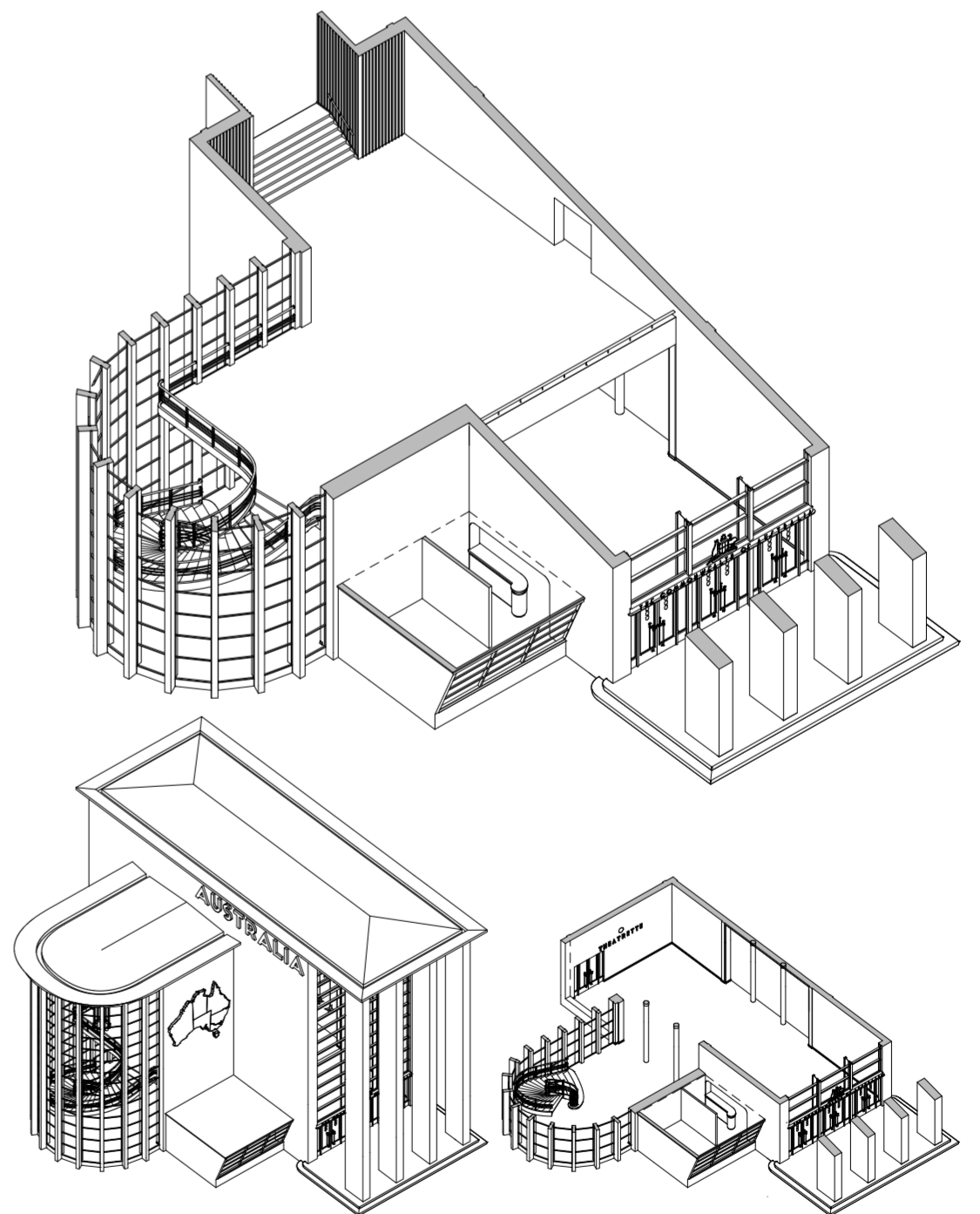
Otto Salvisberg, Administration Offices Entry Foyer, Hoffman La Roche & Co. AG, Basel, 1939



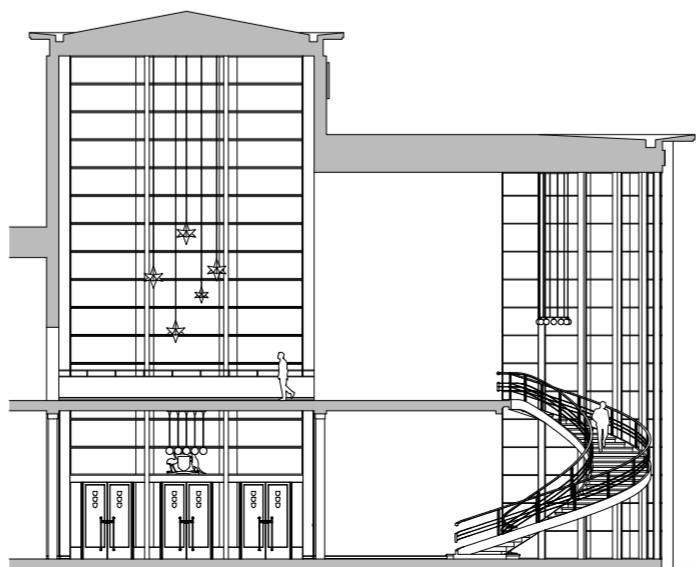
LOCATION PLAN



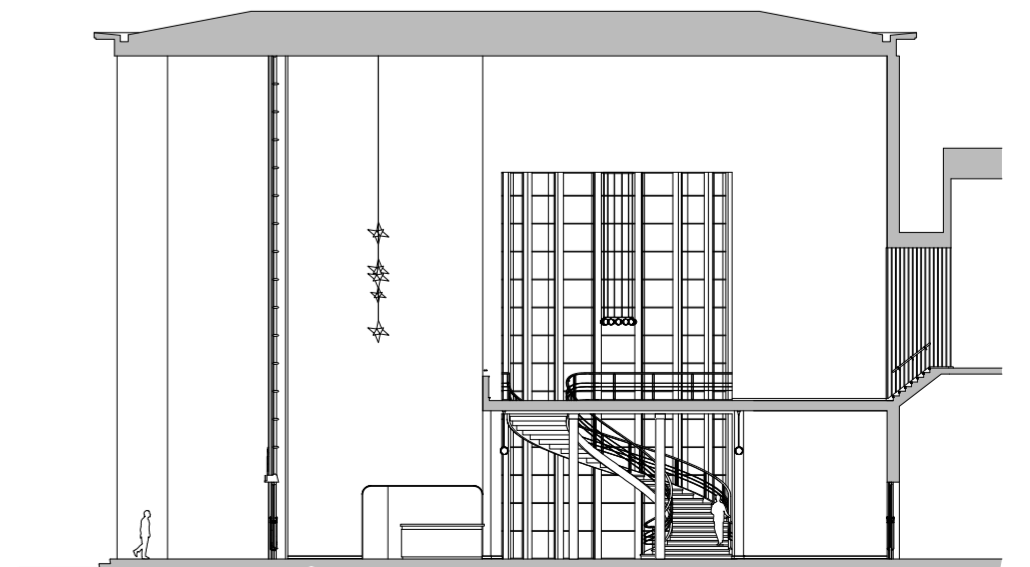
- SITE PLAN
- |                                 |                              |                                 |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. Administration Block         | 11. Manufacturing Industries | 21. Public Carpark              |
| 2. Service Block                | 12. Hydroponic Display       | 22. Exhibitors Carpark          |
| 3. Australian Pavilion          | 13. Restaurant & Cafeteria   | 23. Anemometer                  |
| 4. United Kingdom Pavilion      | 14. General Exhibits         | 24. Port of London Authority    |
| 5. NZ Government Court          | 15. Tower of London Exhibit  | 25. Public Carpark              |
| 6. Motor & Transportation Court | 16. Plunket Pavilion         | 26. Playland                    |
| 7. Dominion Court               | 17. Creche                   | 27. Childrens Play Area         |
| 8. Tower Block                  | 18. Kindergarten             | 28. Station & Miniature Railway |
| 9. Engineering Court            | 19. A.A. Patrol Service      | 29. Taxi Stand                  |
| 10. Cabaret                     | 20. Cycle Park               | 30. Official Carpark            |



GROUND FLOOR PLAN



SECTION A



SECTION B