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# Knoll by West's: Unearthing Local Stories Through a Transnational Design History

Janina Gosseye<sup>®</sup>

## Abstract

West's Furniture Emporium in Brisbane was the first business in Australia to obtain a Knoll manufacturing license in 1956. Laurence (Laurie) West had inherited this company from his father in 1952, and set out to modernize West's, with the help of the Knoll license and of Karl Langer, a Viennese émigré architect who he commissioned to design a showroom for the furniture emporium at 620 Wickham Street. Between 1953 and 1963, West's brought a modern design aesthetic to Brisbane and Australia. Surprisingly, the story of West's and the role that it played in introducing modern furniture to the country is not well known. In Australia, design histories tend to center on Sydney and Melbourne. Haunted by the image of an overgrown country town, Brisbane often sits in the shadows of its southern peers. Drawing on the unpublished memoirs of Laurie, the family history compiled by Margaret West (Laurie's daughter), and articles published in contemporary newspapers and magazines, this article tells the story of Laurie and West's. In doing so, it demonstrates how researching histories of a transnational design company, such as Knoll International, can challenge biases in national design histories and reveal local stories of overlooked figures.

**Keywords:** Australia—business history—furniture—internationalism—manufacture—Knoll

In 2008, Robert Riddel, an architect from Brisbane, found 620 Wickham Street, a commercial property in the city's Fortitude Valley suburb, up for sale. Triggered by memories of what this building had looked like in the 1950s, when he was a young boy, Riddel decided to buy the property, together with his partners in Riddel Architecture, and embarked upon a careful renovation and conservation process, which earned the office the National Trust of Queensland's 2009 Governor's Heritage Gold Award and the Australian Institute of Architects' 2010 National Heritage Award ([Figure 1](#)).<sup>1</sup> As part of the renovation and conservation process, Riddel also set out to document the history of 620 Wickham Street. On September 22, 2009 he, together with John Macarthur and Deborah van der Plaats, both academics affiliated to the University of Queensland (UQ), organized "Working with Karl Langer," an oral history event held at the UQ School of Architecture. This event brought together former collaborators, clients and colleagues of Karl Langer, the architect who had originally designed 620 Wickham Street. In the audience was 91-year-old Laurence (Laurie) P. West (1918–2013), who in 1952 had commissioned Langer to design this remarkable building. At the event, Laurie told the story of how he had asked Langer to design a showroom and workshop for West's Furniture Emporium (also known as "West's"), the business that he ran together with his wife, Mary Quine, which operated from this location between 1953 and 1963. West's, so Laurie revealed, produced and sold items of modern furniture and design, and in 1956 had obtained the first exclusive license to manufacture Knoll furniture in Australia.



**Figure 1** 620 Wickham Street, Brisbane. © Christopher Frederick Jones, 2010.

Originally established in the US in the late 1930s, Knoll began expanding overseas in the 1950s to become Knoll International.<sup>2</sup> Thus far, however, the company's international expansion has been discussed mostly from the perspective of the parent company, acknowledging the agency of a narrowly defined group of actors: Hans and Florence Knoll, and the designers who worked with them. The contributions made by other actors to take Knoll international, including overseas licensees such as West's, have not been given much attention. Surprisingly, also in Australia, the story of West's and the role that it played in introducing modern (Knoll) furniture to the country is not well known. This may have to do with the fact that in Australia, scholarship on interior design history has thus far been limited,<sup>3</sup> with existing histories focusing primarily on Sydney and Melbourne.<sup>4</sup> Haunted by the image of an overgrown country town, Brisbane often sits in the shadows of its southern counterparts. This article tells the story of Laurie and West's contribution to Knoll International by drawing on the unpublished memoirs of Laurie, the family history, and records compiled by Margaret West (Laurie and Mary's daughter), as well as articles published in contemporary newspapers and magazines. In doing so, this article contributes to the drive to globalize design histories.<sup>5</sup> By unpacking the story of a business/licensee, it approaches design history not as a nationalist project that seeks to recover stories of Australian-designed things, but as one about transnational networks and trade. It also demonstrates how researching histories of a transnational design company, such as Knoll International, can challenge biases in national design histories and reveal local stories of overlooked figures.

## West's before Laurie and Laurie before West's

West's was originally established in 1937 at 132 Wickham Street, Fortitude Valley, Brisbane. An article published in Brisbane's *Catholic Advocate* a few months after West's "great opening in the Valley" that June,<sup>6</sup> offered insight into how the business operated: "We wish our readers to understand that West's are manufacturers, and

your purchase of furniture means direct from their factory to your home, thereby saving the middleman's profit."<sup>7</sup>

The outbreak of the Second World War had serious repercussions for West's. In his unpublished memoir, Laurie's father Frank West writes that when the War broke out all the factories were directed toward the manufacturing of war supplies, posing severe challenges for those in the furniture business.<sup>8</sup> Fortunately, when the West family entered the furniture business, they already had some experience in the trade. Between 1928 and 1936, Crafti's Furniture had occupied 132 Wickham Street as a tenant of Frank and May West, Laurie's parents, who had purchased the property in the early 1920s. By the end of the decade, when Edward Crafti moved in, this business was already a household name in Brisbane furniture. Crafti had previously operated from Woolloongabba (another Brisbane suburb), but after a fire damaged their premises in July 1927, they moved to Fortitude Valley, which was then an up-and-coming area of the city. The opening of Crafti's new furniture showroom at 132 Wickham Street on May 2, 1928, elicited enthusiastic reviews in Brisbane newspapers: "Everybody who has a home [...] will find much to delight and interest them in Crafti's new furniture store in Wickham-street [...] The building has four floors, and a range of goods is exhibited to suit all tastes and pockets. [...] Jacobean, Queen Anne, and many other furniture designs are all laid out to perfection."<sup>9</sup>

In 1927, as Crafti set up shop in his parents' building in Brisbane, Laurie, who was then nine years old, enrolled at the Church of England Grammar school in Ballarat (Victoria), where he and his family then lived. In the early 1930s, he studied at Scott's Business College in Ballarat, where he learned typewriting and accountancy, and by the time his family moved to Brisbane in 1936, he had developed a fascination with the furniture trade.<sup>10</sup>

I knew how to keep the accounts but little if anything about the furniture trade. Crafti offered to teach me. He said, "several of my employees have refused to do what I am asking of you, however the one who did, became a very useful salesman. You need to visit every furniture retailer, posing as a client and remember the responses you get and the things they show you. Then come back to me." [...] My adventure showed me that most of both large and small shops had similar merchandise. This revealed that the local market was [...] conservative. [...] Interior design, such as the placement of furniture in a room was not mentioned.<sup>11</sup>

By the mid-1930s, Crafti's rent payments had become erratic.<sup>12</sup> Frank West informed Crafti that the rent needed to be brought up to date and the building vacated. In 1937, the West family moved into an apartment on the top floor of 132 Wickham Street. During the war, Laurie served as an accountant in the Australian army's Services Pay Corps, as well as at Fort Cowen-Cowen on Moreton Island and at Fort Lytton as a range finding specialist,<sup>13</sup> while his father toured auction rooms, repairing and renewing any good furniture he could obtain to keep West's afloat under wartime materials restrictions.<sup>14</sup>

## Knoll enters Australia

International modern furniture design began appearing in Australian magazines from the 1920s and 1930s, with a noticeable increase after the end of the Second World War.<sup>15</sup> Because of high duties on imported goods, actual examples of modern imports in the country remained few. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, encounters with modern furniture still occurred mainly through international publications, features in

local magazines, and first-hand experience through travel.<sup>16</sup> Laurie's autobiography confirms this: "We read *Domus* from Italy, *Form* from Sweden and *Interiors* plus *Architectural Forum* from the United States of America. These regular journals kept us up to date with contemporary interior design and furniture in Europe, Scandinavia, and the United States." (Figure 2)<sup>17</sup>

Pieces produced by Knoll began appearing in Australian magazines and newspapers in the early 1950s. In 1951–1952, while living as a foreign correspondent in New York, Australian journalist Keith Dunstan wrote several articles for the *Australian Home Beautiful* that featured Knoll furniture. Photographs of the Florence Knoll extension table, Eero Saarinen's Model 72 chair, and Franco Albini's Model 47 chair and Model 80 desk were included in his articles "Furniture America Likes," published in May 1951 and "Where Modern Design Lives" which appeared in June 1952.<sup>18</sup> Another article by Dunstan published in April 1952 specifically sang the praises of Knoll's Grasshopper Chair: "If you are not used to modern furniture, a Saarinen chair may look strange, unnatural, with its weird moulding and plastic shape. It may look fragile and you may sit down gingerly, thinking it will never support your weight. But it does; it is stronger than most chairs and superbly comfortable."<sup>19</sup> A piece published in the *Brisbane Telegraph* in August 1951 described the Tripolina Chair as "the nearest thing to being borne on a cloud," and commented that "a similar chair by Hardoy in America was a prize-winner



**Figure 2** Laurence (Laurie) P. West holding *Domus* 341, ca. 1961. © Margaret West, Brisbane.

at the Museum of Modern Art.”<sup>20</sup> By the time that this article appeared, Knoll had already ceased production of the Hardoy chair after losing a lawsuit to protect its rights to the design.<sup>21</sup>

The “Decoration 1953” exhibition held at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York sparked a spate of newspaper articles in Australia—Sydney in particular—on Florence Knoll and the Knoll Associates.<sup>22</sup> On 30 April 1953, the *Sydney Morning Herald* commented that “glitter sparkled through a recent exhibition of high-style decoration by some of the top designing talents of America,” and made special mention of Florence Knoll’s design for an apartment room at the exhibit.<sup>23</sup> Less than two weeks later, a lengthy article appeared in the *Sydney Sunday Herald*, discussing not only on the work of Knoll Associates but also (misogynistically) commenting on the “figure” of its design director:

Pert raven-haired Florence Knoll gives lie to the old saw that no one woman could be (a) attractive, (b) an artistic success, and (c) a competent businesswoman. No one not even her rivals in New York’s burgeoning modern furniture field, denies that the five foot three, 105-pounds [sic.] Mrs. Knoll combines in herself all three virtues. [...] Mrs. Knoll’s greatest pride is the Knoll Associates’ New York showroom. Fifteen floors above teeming Madison Avenue and Fifty-Seventh Street in the heart of Manhattan’s Luxury Row, Mrs. Knoll assembled her best pieces, together with some of the finest work of the “Associates.” The “Associates” are furniture and textile artists gathered from all over the world by the Knolls – Florence and her husband Hans, 38. [...] The Knolls are still on the lookout for new and original talent. [...] Here in the New York showroom designed by Florence Knoll – with its indoor lily pond – their work is shown to advantage. [...] As concerns Hans and Florence Knoll’s “business” sense, the best testimony is the fact that the firm, less than 12 years old, is already doing a three-million dollar volume yearly.<sup>24</sup>

Throughout 1953, more articles on Florence Knoll and Knoll furniture appeared in Australian newspapers and magazines, informed by growing interest in modern furniture design.<sup>25</sup> In July of that year, the Furniture Guild Mart staged an exhibition at the Royal Sydney Showground. Inspired by the 1953 “Good Design” exhibition in New York and Chicago, this event was exclusively for furniture retailers. It was to help them prepare for “Furniture Fashion Time,” an event aimed at making “the Australian public more furniture conscious.”<sup>26</sup> “The most revolutionary chair” on display at the Royal Showground, *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported, was “[...] a contour chair made entirely of moulded plastic on a light steel frame. Based on a Charles Eames design, it weighs only 11lb, is made in all colours, and is completely heat and weather resistant.”<sup>27</sup> The use of the term “based on” suggests that this fiberglass armchair, which in the US was produced by Zenith Plastics for Herman Miller, was reproduced locally, in Australia, due to import restrictions.

In the early 1950s, authentic Knoll pieces were extremely rare in the country. Some of the first items were likely imported by architect Harry Seidler when he migrated to Australia in 1948. Seidler brought with him not only two plywood steel chairs by Charles Eames and a tubular aluminum Barwa lounge chair, but also Saarinen’s recent Womb chair and a Hardoy Butterfly chair that he had purchased from Knoll Associates’ New York showroom.<sup>28</sup> A Viennese émigré, Seidler, who had studied architecture at Cambridge, the University of Manitoba (Canada), and Harvard, became instrumental in popularizing modern furniture—including pieces produced by Knoll—in Australia.<sup>29</sup> He moved to the country to oversee the completion of a house that he had designed

for his parents at Wahroonga, north of Sydney. Shortly after arrival, he set up shop in a one-room studio at Point Piper. The unusual arrangement of Seidler's living/working quarters quickly drew the attention of local media. In April 1950, Australian architecture and design critic Nora Cooper wrote:

[...] not everybody would consider a dark storeroom beneath a block of flats on the tip of Point Piper as having any practical value as a home. [...] Having obtained possession of this floor space that nobody wanted, Mr. Seidler proceeded to turn it into a studio flat. [...] Division between living and working areas in the studio is marked by a free-standing bookcase about 5ft. high. It is open on both sides and painted light grey. [...] Chairs of bent plywood mounted on slender tubular steel frames were brought by Mr Seidler from America, where they were designed by C. Eames and Barwa Associates.<sup>30</sup>

In October 1953, shortly after Furniture Fashion Time had drawn to a close, the *Sydney Morning Herald* once again featured a piece on Seidler's Point Piper studio, commenting: "An American unit set of desk, dressing table or storage cupboard, all standing on a woven timber bench that can be used separately as a buffet table, was designed by Florence Knoll of Knoll Associates [...]."<sup>31</sup> The newspaper likely chose to revisit Seidler's studio not only because of Furniture Fashion Time, but also because the house that the architect had designed for his parents—today known as the Rose Seidler House—had won the Royal Institute of Australian Architects' prestigious Sulman Medal in 1951, resulting in a flurry of publications on its inventive design.<sup>32</sup> Many articles commented extensively on the interior fit-out of the house and its furniture, which included Hardoy chairs, a Grasshopper chair, and Eames chairs that Seidler had shipped from New York: "The twelve Eames chairs in honey-coloured plywood do duty at various points around the house," Nora Cooper wrote, adding that a settee and armchairs had been made by Sydney designer, Peter Makeig.<sup>33</sup>

A former employee of Seidler, Makeig had studied architecture at the University of Sydney in the late 1940s, and from the early 1950s started producing international modern designs in Australia.<sup>34</sup> Initially, Makeig reproduced by hand versions of the chairs that Seidler had shipped from the US, but enthusiasm from the public soon demanded mass production and so, in 1951, he established Descon Laminates to manufacture international chair designs at a factory in the Sydney suburb of Brookvale.<sup>35</sup>

Soon a selection of chairs by famous overseas designers, who have exploited the latest contemporary ideas in technique and material will be made in Australia. So far all but one of them have been seen here only in overseas magazines or in odd ones and twos imported from America. The chairs are being made in Sydney by Descon Laminates, under the direction of designer Peter J. Mackeig [sic].<sup>36</sup>

According to design historian Kirsty Grant, "Descon had approached American manufacturers seeking to obtain a license to reproduce the international chairs in Australia, but the cost was too great for the scale of the local market. They were able to copy them without a license, however, because the products were not covered by copyright law."<sup>37</sup> Architectural historian Philip Goad has subsequently argued that the furniture pieces, as mass-produced items, were not covered by copyright law so long as Makeig did not use the original designer's name as a point of sale. This is likely why in advertisements the Grasshopper chair was described either as "Contour chair" or the "Descon Easy chair," the Eames chair was described as "Plyform chair," and the Hardoy chair was described as "Hammock chair." (Figure 3)<sup>38</sup> Laurie's memoirs confirm this: "A young engineer, Peter Makeig, had made enquiries concerning licensed local manufacture that he informed



**contour chair**

The single form - fitting shape provides maximum comfort and relaxation. The moulded arm-leg unit is in natural silver ash or maple. Available in self chosen fabrics or coloured webbing. (design by EERO SAARINEN).

**descon laminates**

Condamine St. and  
Pittwater Rd., Brookvale, N.S.W. XW5959

Phone:

**Figure 3** Advertisements for Descon Laminates' "Contour Chair." *The Australian Home Beautiful*, December 1952, 66.

me were rejected. As import was not allowed, he went ahead and made quite good copies. These he later sold to Harry's clients and to me."<sup>39</sup>

## A new boss, a new showroom, a new license

In 1952, shortly after Makeig had begun producing copies of Knoll furniture in Sydney, and one year after Knoll established its first subsidiaries in France and Germany, Laurie took over the furniture business that his father had established in 1937. If under Frank West, West's Furniture Emporium had made "to order in contemporary or any period design,"<sup>40</sup> Laurie was determined to chart a new course and made his vision clear in pieces published in the *Brisbane Telegraph* in the early 1950s. In 1951, he argued that "[...] new overseas designs should be built into Australian furniture as soon as they become available,"<sup>41</sup> and in 1952, he penned a vigorous plea for modern furniture design.<sup>42</sup> For Laurie, this was the only way forward, and he made it his mission to introduce the finest (overseas) pieces to the Australian public. Circa 1951, he contacted Pierre Jeanneret to enquire if West's could sell his designs<sup>43</sup>—including the 1948 Scissors chair manufactured by Knoll—and in September 1952, he attended the "furniture convention" in Sydney.<sup>44</sup> This event was planned to coincide with Furniture Fashion Time, "when hundreds of thousands of pounds' worth of modern furniture designs will be on display in store windows throughout the Commonwealth."<sup>45</sup> In his autobiography, Laurie writes:

In 1952, I travelled to Sydney and attended the, then, annual, "Furniture Convention." [...] While in Sydney I took the opportunity to call on Harry Seidler. [...] I took a cab to this address at Point Piper [...]. [The studio] delighted me as a superb example of intelligent use of space. [...] The two houses he had designed for his parents and brother had just been awarded the Sulman prize. [...] He gave me a direction card and invited me to see for myself. [...] I was able to sneak round and knock on Rose Seidler's door. As soon as I told her I was a friend of Karl Langer [...] she invited me in [...]. I asked how they had obtained their beautiful furniture. They gave me the names of an engineer Peter Makeig and a steelworker Bart Bowen. They were making copies, probably from originals Harry had imported.<sup>46</sup>

Laurie's mission to introduce the Australian public to modern designs was not limited to furniture but extended to architecture. In the early 1950s, he studied some architectural subjects at Brisbane's Central Technical College,<sup>47</sup> but his interest in architecture commenced several years before that. In the mid-1940s, Laurie and Mary, who married in 1943, began looking for an architect to commission a house. Browsing through books and magazines for inspiration, they came across *Subtropical Housing*, a small volume written by the Viennese émigré Karl Langer that included five house plan prototypes.<sup>48</sup> These fascinated the Wests, and the couple contacted the architect.<sup>49</sup> The visit to Karl and his wife Gertrude Langer's riverfront flat was Laurie's introduction to the principals of the modern movement.<sup>50</sup> In 1946, Laurie and Mary built a

house in Brisbane Corso, Fairfield based on one of the designs included in *Subtropical Housing*,<sup>51</sup> and in 1952, shortly after taking over the furniture business, Laurie commissioned Langer to design a new showroom for West's at 618 Wickham Street in Fortitude Valley [now number 620], about one kilometer from the original shop. Requirements were as follows:

A furniture shop and showroom designed with the utmost economy in the contemporary manner. Something unusually striking [...] to attract attention, since the premises are located outside the ordinary shopping area. Goods to be visible from the street without interference from reflection and glare. Interior to be well-lighted to compensate for the difficulty of daylighting resulting from the great depth of the shop, and to be dust proof to save cleaning of goods.<sup>52</sup>

In response, Langer designed an inventive glazed box, with a workshop at the back.<sup>53</sup> The window along Wickham Street was slanted inwards by 30 degrees to minimize reflection and glare. This window, as well as the one along the south-western edge of the showroom, rested on concrete and rubber pads that were submerged in an elongated and irregularly shaped pond. This water feature—which was possibly inspired by the shallow reflecting pool of the Knoll Associates showroom at 575 Madison Avenue (1951)—penetrated the interior of the shop and was filled with brightly coloured fish. A dramatic cantilevered timber awning spanning the width of the footpath along Wickham Street protected prospective buyers from sun and rain as they examined the furniture on display. Multiple light wells perforated the roof, ensuring that the showroom was well lit. A wall of natural stone, along with a protruding bright yellow entry door abutting it, completed the daring modern design. Furniture was also displayed on the roof: “The sky's the limit when it comes to displaying outdoor furniture at West's showroom, Wickham Street, Valley. There is no ceiling to this roof-top scene,” the *Brisbane Telegraph* announced.<sup>54</sup> If Langer's design enabled the furniture to move outside, it also brought nature inside: “The edges [of the showroom] were softened by cascading planting and flowers,” Laurie wrote, which “were complimented by flying saucers baskets suspended under the awning.”<sup>55</sup> Behind the showroom, accessible from a rear alley, was a spacious workshop, where furniture and furniture parts were produced and stored (**Figures 4 and 5**).

Early photographs of the new showroom show a rich range of modern furniture on display, including Australian designer Grant Featherstone's R160 armchair and stool, Jeanneret's Scissors Chair, and Eames “Plyform chairs,” which were likely produced by Descon Laminates, who initially supplied West's with (unlicensed) replicas from the Knoll catalogue before Laurie obtained the Knoll license.<sup>56</sup> At the helm of the furniture emporium and with a brand-new showroom, this license was the final piece that Laurie and Mary needed to complete the puzzle. Circa 1955, Frank West traveled to the US with a letter by Laurie describing Langer's new showroom and workshop, and with a request to obtain a Knoll International license:

He [Frank] met the vice president of “Knoll International” who gave him a rather cold reception. However he left my letter. When he called back the next day, he was amazed at the change of attitude. Apparently Mrs Florence Schultz Knoll who had taken over the leadership since her husband's recent tragic death, had read my letter. As a result I became the 18<sup>th</sup> member of the Knoll International family. My territory was Australia. [...] We were obliged to pay an 8% royalty on all items sold.<sup>57</sup>



**Figure 4** West's Furniture showroom, Brisbane, 1954. University of Queensland, Fryer Library, Karl Langer Papers, UQFL158, Box 44b.

Upon obtaining the license in 1956, West received congratulatory letters from several of his Knoll International colleagues. Giorgio Fornasetti and Teo Ducci of Knoll International Italy wrote: "We know, by Knoll International—New York, you have now entered the big Knoll Family and we are very glad to send you our best wishes for your greatest success."<sup>58</sup> Yves Vidal, general manager of Knoll International France, similarly congratulated West on becoming "the newest member of the Knoll International family now operating in so many parts of the world."<sup>59</sup>

### Knoll by West's

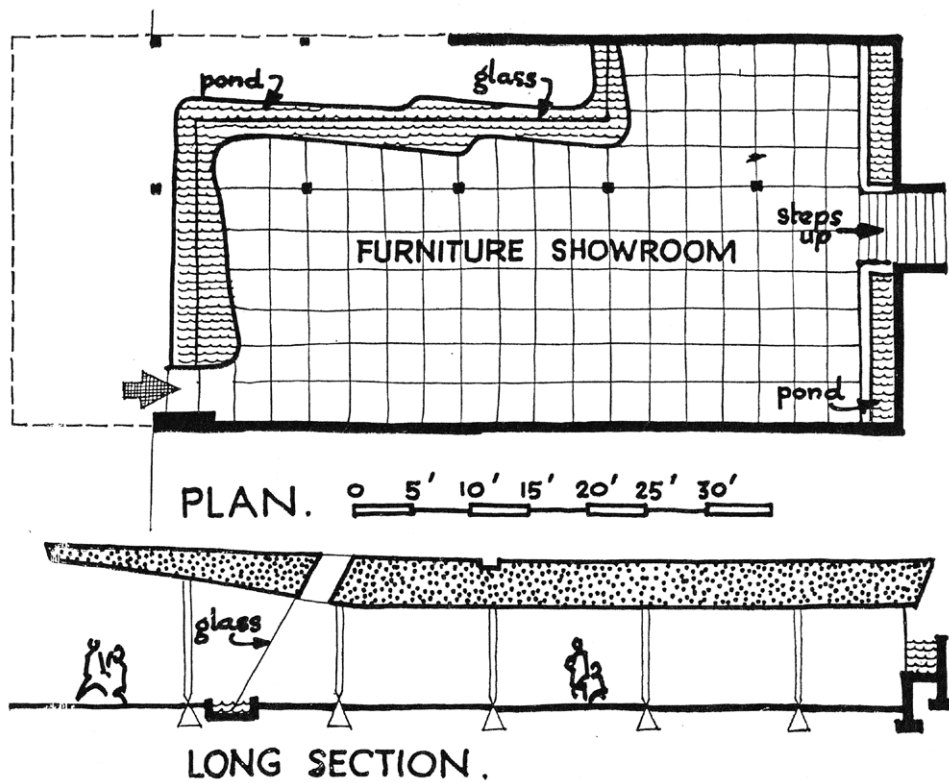
When Laurie was appointed licensee, strict import restrictions and high tariffs on imported goods were still in force in Australia. This meant that while it was possible to import original Knoll furniture from the US, it was costly to do so. More affordable were the licensed copies made by West's, who produced all models locally based on prototypes and shop drawings provided by Knoll:

All our import quota was required for prototypes and essential hardware. This process involved the organisation of subcontract networks of skilled craftsmen using specialised equipment. [...] Not

only was it necessary to organise a large team of craftsmen firms and with them develop some techniques completely new to Australia but we also had to invest capital in inventory and development costs.<sup>60</sup>

Some of the fiberglass moulds were imported—and were subject to current import quotas—as were the linens, which came from Belgium and Dundee in Scotland. Other textiles were sourced from Australian mills—including Morris Woollen Mills in Ipswich—and Aniline-treated kangaroo hide was used in the Barcelona chair cushions. These were made by a Russian boot maker based in nearby Woolloongabba. Apart from upholstery, steelwork was also subcontracted, while the carpentry was undertaken in the workshop located behind the showroom at 620 Wickham Street.<sup>61</sup> In his autobiography, Laurie proudly writes that "from 1956 to 1963 we developed the local production of every model in the [Knoll] collection." (Figure 6)<sup>62</sup>

Despite strict import restrictions, Laurie obtained the Knoll license at a fortuitous time. From the early 1950s, cultural life in Brisbane—which was long considered an overgrown country town that lacked the cultural capital of Sydney or Melbourne—had begun to blossom. When in 1952 the Johnstone Gallery<sup>63</sup> opened in a wartime air-raid shelter under the Brisbane Arcade, the *Truth* newspaper excitedly reported: "Art is now firmly established as a bright facet of the city's cultural life and the new Johnstone Gallery with a typically Queensland atmosphere, cool off-white walls, delicately pastel tinted roof and tropic plants, already is a popular rendezvous for a large number of local art lovers."<sup>64</sup> Displaying furniture, paintings and sculpture, the gallery played an important role in promoting modern art, architecture, and design in Brisbane. In 1954, the year that Brian Johnstone, who co-owned the gallery with his wife Marjory Mant, began sponsoring a student design competition for fifth year



**Figure 5** Plan of West's showroom. "Furniture Shop Brisbane, Queensland," *Architecture* (January-March 1954), 17. Karl Langer Architectural Plans, John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland.



**Figure 6** Knoll furniture on display in West's Furniture showroom, Brisbane, ca. 1963. Photograph by Laurence West, held in the private collection of Margaret West, Brisbane.

architecture students at UQ, he told *Queensland Country Life*: “In Australia there are many architects who recognize [...] that the décor is an integral part of the home and not just an afterthought.”<sup>65</sup>

From the early 1950s, acceptance of modern furniture in Queensland, as elsewhere in Australia, steadily increased: “Modern furniture has established a market in Queensland. A few years ago it required a degree of courage for a family to join the ‘modern’ camp—a minority of strange, rather precious people. Today, the situation has changed, and instead it needs some courage and even defiance for a young couple to ‘go’ period.”<sup>66</sup> Events such as the first Brisbane Homes Exhibition held in the city hall in 1954 contributed to this trend, as did the growing number of day-to-day encounters with modern architecture and design.<sup>67</sup> In the mid-1950s, the Brisbane City Council, for instance, embarked on a public lending library building campaign. The design of these libraries—Annerley (1957), Chermside (1958) and Toowong (1961)—was the work of the freshly-appointed Brisbane City Architect James Birrell, who belonged to a new generation of architects that introduced modernism to Queensland. All three libraries were resolutely modern in architecture and furnished with Eames and Featherstone chairs supplied by West’s. Another representative of this new generation was Robin Gibson, who designed Cook’s Travel Agency (1958) in Edward Street, Brisbane, which featured two Bertoa side chairs (supplied by West’s) mounted on a sculpted terrazzo floor (**Figure 7**).

Along with a psychiatrist and a solicitor, Gibson was one of two Queensland architectural practices listed under “professions” on a “Partial list of users of Knoll International furniture in Australia” that Laurie compiled around 1959.<sup>68</sup> Other Queensland “users” mentioned in this document were the Student Union Complex (1960) and Brisbane’s Women’s College at UQ (1958), and the Church of England Grammar School; all listed under “educational institutions.” “Banks” included the A&NZ bank in Surfers Paradise (1959); “Government” listed the Commonwealth Department of Trade and Government House in Brisbane; “offices” referred to various Brisbane-based businesses; and “libraries” were the Brisbane City Council Municipal Libraries.

As West’s was the only licensee of Knoll International in the country, its clients did not only hail from Queensland, but also from other Australian states. They included Harry Seidler from Sydney, the head office of B.H.P. (Broken Hill Proprietary Company) in Melbourne, and the Canadian Embassy in Canberra. Langdon Badger, an Adelaide interior designer, purchased the first Barcelona chair manufactured in Brisbane using Australian stainless steel and leather.<sup>69</sup> When in October 1960 Badger sent Laurie a cheque to settle his account, he accompanied it with a letter, stating: “I must tell you how well this furniture is made [...] Please find enclosed 5yds of the 54” Black & White for the 421 [Bertoia] chairs. [...] I am very excited to see my Mies van der Rohe and Eero Saarinen [...] chairs and will await the A.N.A. [regional] plane with interest.”<sup>70</sup>

Distribution of West’s furniture also occurred through agents in other Australian states, including Artes Studio in Sydney (New South Wales) and Taylormade in Perth (Western Australia).<sup>71</sup> Taylormade, which David Foulkes Taylor established in 1957,<sup>72</sup> sold imported designs as well as works by local artists and artisans.<sup>73</sup> In February 1960, Foulkes Taylor wrote a letter to Laurie requesting he be appointed West’s agent in Western Australia:



**Figure 7** Cook's World Travel Service Office, Brisbane, 1959; designed by Robin Gibson for Theo Thynne and Associates. Royal Australian Institute of Architects Photographs, John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland, Brisbane.

Geoffrey Summerhayes has just informed me that you are the Australian agent for Knoll International. I write to you to suggest that you consider appointing me as your agent in Western Australia. [...] I've now been going [with the business] for 2,5 years [...] I decided to exhaust local sources before I attempted to import from abroad [...] With regards to Knoll International: I do not have the space here to give over to a Knoll section but why the idea excites me so much at the moment is because for the last 3 weeks I have been investigating the possibility of buying an "abandoned" cinema which is on the other side of the University in Broadway. [...] Will you please send me a catalogue of your products, together with a price list? [...] I find that with the Descon Eames chairs there is very little difference between Sydney and Perth prices. By the way I hope that your workmanship is better than Descons!<sup>74</sup>

It is possible that the distribution of Knoll furniture produced by West's was not limited to Australia but extended overseas to other Knoll licensees. In May 1960, Laurie received a request from Tazin S.A., then the exclusive licensed manufacturer and distributor of Knoll International in Iran, with a request to send them prospectuses, catalogues, and other kinds of publicity of Knoll Australia. Tazin went so far as to suggest that it might import Knoll furniture made in Australia, as well as in France, Germany, and India.<sup>75</sup> Whether West's subsequently shipped furniture from Brisbane to Tehran is unknown. If they did not, it certainly wouldn't have been for lack of ambition. In 1959, Laurie developed a plan to form a private company "in which Knoll America had agreed to make a small investment."<sup>76</sup> On this basis, the Queensland State Government had shown itself prepared to assist West's in the form of a guarantee so that the company could obtain low-cost finance. By the late 1950s, business was good. Laurie writes: "We had proved steady demand and the product was well promoted in international journals with local circulation to discriminating firms in the design professions."<sup>77</sup>

### West's post-Knoll and 620 Wickham Street post-West's

In December 1959, in preparation for the establishment of the new company, Laurie put together a detailed prospectus in which he laid out his business plan.<sup>78</sup> He argued that with product development done and manufacturing organized, in a growing market (with little competition), and following a carefully planned advertising campaign, the new company would be able "to increase [West's] present turnover approximately four times."<sup>79</sup> Nevertheless, despite Laurie's careful preparation, the plan to form a private company with the support of the Knoll head office in the US came to naught. In 1959, Knoll Associates, along with its international arm, was sold to Art Metal. Although it was agreed that Knoll "would be operating autonomously, maintaining present manufacturing and sales facilities [while] Florence Knoll [...] will remain president of the three Knoll organizations [and ...] become a member of the Art Metal board as well as design and research director of the parent organization,"<sup>80</sup> the purchase impacted the investment agreement that was made with West's. Laurie concluded that "Art Metal [...] were not prepared to invest overseas."<sup>81</sup>

If the aborted business venture was a blow for West's, the Australian government's decision in the early 1960s to lift import restrictions was the kiss of death.<sup>82</sup> By mid-1962 West's had lost its licence. *The Bulletin* reported: "One of the latest to show its hand in Melbourne is Knolls [sic] [...]. Knoll now has associates or licensees in 22 countries. Now in Australia, its furniture is being made by Form Pty Ltd in Melbourne."<sup>83</sup> A few months later, in an article entitled "Controversy of the Chairs," *The Australian Home Beautiful* clarified:

The manufacture of Knoll designs in Australia is another enterprise of the Latchford Family of Melbourne and their associates [...]. Form Pty. Ltd., a separate company, has been established as licensee for Australia by Knoll International Ltd. This company will assist architects and designers in interior planning and furnishing and will distribute the furniture in the principal cities of Australia.<sup>84</sup>

Oddly enough, the “controversy” mentioned in the title of the article did not refer to the (presumed) bidding war that had landed William Latchford & Sons the Australian Knoll licence, but rather to the furor that the modern Saarinen designs had caused in Australia. According to Laurie: “The new licensee company [...] unlike myself, faced no barriers to import and [had] an established network in all states. In effect [they] had almost, for a time, a license to print money.”<sup>85</sup> If stiff import restrictions had encouraged Laurie and Makeig, who were design devotees as much as entrepreneurs, to pioneer novel manufacturing techniques to produce modern furniture locally, once the import restrictions were lifted, the modern furniture business in Australia lost some of this pioneering passion. The consequences were dire for the businesses that had up until then been producing Knoll furniture in Australia. Descon Laminates closed in early in 1962,<sup>86</sup> and West’s followed suit in November 1963.<sup>87</sup>

In 1964, 620 Wickham Street was sold to Arthur Walter Barrs, who owned a car radio business, and remained in the ownership of the Barrs family until the late 1970s. At one point, the building was leased to Philips Industries Holdings, an electrical products company, and between circa 1988 and 2008, Queensland Used Appliances occupied the building. In the four decades after the building was sold, its appearance changed dramatically. The Wickham Street facade of the showroom was converted into a more conventional shopfront (with vertical windows that spanned the full width of the site); the pond was concreted in; the glass walls removed; a section of the front awning’s ceiling painted over; and the light-wells roofed over. The workshop at the rear was also demolished and a skillion-roofed shed was constructed in its place.<sup>88</sup>

As the distinctive features of the showroom disappeared, so too did the memory of West’s Furniture Emporium.<sup>89</sup> It was, for instance, not included in the 2008 exhibition and book *Modern Times: The Untold Story of Modernism in Australia*,<sup>90</sup> and in 2014, when the National Gallery of Victoria organized the exhibition “Mid-Century Modern: Australian Furniture Design,”<sup>91</sup> West’s Furniture Emporium—and the role that it played in bringing (international) modern designs to the Australian public—was not mentioned. Descon Laminates was. The omission in the latter volume is even more striking considering that by 2014, Riddel Architecture had already excavated the former showroom from underneath layers of concrete and paint and, in this process, had unearthed an initial history of the former furniture emporium.

Even if the omission is striking, for those familiar with Australia’s socio-political history and geography, it is not surprising. Haunted by its erstwhile image of cultural wasteland, Queensland—and, by extension, Brisbane—is often still marginalized in Australian design histories. Against this background, this article demonstrates how the writing of decentered histories of international design companies, which focus more on social actors and the forces with which they interact, can challenge entrenched (national) narratives about “design centers” and “cultural backwaters.” It also shows how such an endeavor can bring to light the stories of overlooked figures, such as Laurie and West’s, and ultimately reveals that behind the figureheads of international design companies—in this case Hans and Florence Knoll and their associates—often lurked much larger networks of people who by navigating local regulations and markets and through activating local know-how became instrumental in propelling these companies’ success and fame.

## Postscript

In December 2015, 620 Wickham Street was added to the Queensland Heritage Register. In 2023, Riddel sold the property to the Australian Institute of Architects and, as of writing, the building awaits its repurposing as its Queensland Chapter headquarters.

Janina Gosseye<sup>✉</sup>  
 Department of Architecture,  
 Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment,  
 Delft University of Technology,  
 Julianalaan 134, 2628 BZ Delft, The Netherlands  
 Email: [j.gosseye@tudelft.nl](mailto:j.gosseye@tudelft.nl)

Janina Gosseye is Professor of Building Ideologies at the TU Delft Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment. She has authored and edited several books, including *Urban Design the 20th Century: A History* (2021, with Tom Avermaete), *Activism at Home: Architects Dwelling Between Politics, Aesthetics and Resistance* (2021, with Isabelle Doucet), *Speaking of Buildings: Oral History in Architectural Research* (2019, with Naomi Stead and Deborah van der Plaats), *Shopping Towns Europe: Commercial Collectivity and the Architecture of the Shopping Centre, 1945–1975* (2017, with Tom Avermaete), and *Hot Modernism: Queensland Architecture 1945–1975* (2015, with John Macarthur, Deborah van der Plaats, and Andrew Wilson).

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If you have any comments to make in relation to this article, please go to the journal website on <http://jdh.oxfordjournals.org> and access the article. There is a faculty on the site for sending e-mail responses to the editorial board and other readers.

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## Notes

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- 9 "The Home Beautiful: Crafti's New Showrooms," *Brisbane Courier*, 3 May 1928, 3.
- 10 West, "Laurence and Mary West," 23–4.
- 11 Laurence P. West, "The Rollicking Years of a Rolling Stone: An Autobiography," 41. Unpublished memoirs of Laurence West, private collection Margaret West, Brisbane.
- 12 Ibid. In the mid-1930s Edward Crafti had purchased premises elsewhere in Wickham Street to build the Rex Theatre, which likely overextended Crafti financially. Source: "Modern Hands Build New Theatre: Rex in Keeping with Valley Progress," *Truth* (Brisbane), 10 May 1936, 38.
- 13 West, "Laurence and Mary West," 27.
- 14 In July 1944, the *Brisbane Courier-Mail* reported that Frank P. West "was fined £5, with £1/7/1 costs, on each of two charges of having sold one and two of the lowboys [ordered from Nicholas Gayton] without their being marked as required." Source: "Furniture Breach Brings Fines," *Courier-Mail*, 1 July 1944, 6.
- 15 An important source in this respect was *The Home*, an Australian magazine that appeared between 1920 and 1942. Its October 1928 issue, for instance, included abstracts from Le Corbusier's book *Towards a New Architecture* and reported on furniture and homewares designed at the Bauhaus in Dessau. In 1933, the magazine featured a steel table and chairs designed by Marcel Breuer, photographed in the home of the (aptly named) Staal family from Sydney. When Australian steel mills began producing high-quality steel tubing from the early 1930s, similar cantilevered tube chairs (that drew from Breuer's designs) were also produced locally. Henry Pynor, "Visit Old Countries for New Ideas for Your Home," *The Home: The Australian Journal of Quality* 9, no. 10 (October 1928): 48–9; "The Grace of Steel," *The Home* (January 1933): 24–5; Michael Bogle, "Furniture Design," *Australia Modern*, eds. in Hannah Lewi and Philip Goad (Melbourne: Thames and Hudson, 2019), 244–51.
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- 25 "Furniture Designer Has Clear Ideas," *The Cumberland Argus*, 20 May 1953, 1; "A Room at College," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 May 1953, 3; "Two Women Revolutionise Décor in the Dormitory," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 May 1953, 3; "'Do's' And 'Don'ts' For Home Decorators," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 July 1953, 8; "Advice On Decorating," *The Cumberland Argus*, 15 July 1953, 7.
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  - 52 "Furniture Shop Brisbane, Queensland," *Architecture* (January–March 1954), 17.
  - 53 "West's Furniture Showroom." in *Hot Modernism: Queensland Architecture 1945–1975*, eds. John Macarthur et al. (London: Artifice, 2015), 47; Janina Gosseye, "A Touch of Vienna, A Pinch of America and a Whiff of Exoticism: Karl Langer's Architecture for Leisure and Lifestyle in Australia," in van der Plaats and Macarthur, *Karl Langer*, 194–231.
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  - 57 Ibid.
  - 58 Letter from Giorgio Fornasetti and Teo Ducci, Knoll International Italy, to Laurence West, 14 November 1956. Private collection Margaret West, Brisbane.
  - 59 Letter from Yves Vidal, Knoll International France, to Laurence West, 15 November 1956. Private collection Margaret West, Brisbane.

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- 79 Ibid.
- 80 "Art Metal Buys Three Companies," *The New York Times*, 10 June 1959, 51.
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- 83 "Comfort Displaces Shabbiness in Office Suites," *The Bulletin*, 21 July 1962, 45.
- 84 "Controversy of the Chairs," *The Australian Home Beautiful* (October 1962), 59.
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- 86 "In the Supreme Court of New South Wales—IN EQUITY—No. 251 of 1962—In the matter of DESCON LAMINATES," *Government Gazette of the State of New South Wales*, 16 March 1962, p. 771. Retrieved May 21, 2024, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article220247947>, accessed 20 May 2024. See also: Goad, op. cit., 183.
- 87 "West's Furniture Showroom: History."
- 88 Ibid.
- 89 The gradual disappearance of West's was accompanied by the appearance of others—such as George Freedman in 1969—whose contributions to bringing Knoll to Australia have since been proclaimed more loudly. "George Freedman: Interior Architect 1936-2016," <https://georgefreedman.com/>, accessed 11 January 2025.
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