



**Douglas Snelling
Pan-Pacific Modern Design
and Architecture**

Davina Jackson

Studies in Architecture

DOUGLAS SNELLING: PAN-PACIFIC MODERN DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE

Douglas Burrage Snelling (1916–85) was one of Britain's significant emigré architects and designers. Born in Kent and educated in New Zealand, he became one of Australia's leading mid-century architects, of luxury residences and commercial buildings, and a trend-setting designer of furniture, interiors and landscapes. This is the first comprehensive study of Snelling's pan-Pacific life, works and trans-disciplinary significance. It provides a critical examination of this recently controversial modernist, revealing him to be a colourful and talented protagonist who led antipodean interpretations of American, especially Wrightian and southern Californian, architecture, design and lifestyle innovations.

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Pan-Pacific Modern Design and Architecture

Davina Jackson

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Preface

Douglas Snelling (1916–1985) offers an intriguing case of geographic diversity and critical eclecticism in the global culture of mid-twentieth-century modern architecture and design. He was born in England, raised in New Zealand, inducted to film-making, modern style and architecture in southern California, became successful as an architect and designer in Sydney, and pioneered mid-century modern ‘Tiki fantasy’ (Wright-via-Hollywood) interpretations of traditions in Polynesia and southeast Asia. For today’s scholars of modern architecture and design, he is a new character of significance to the chronologies of several professional disciplines, technology innovations, aesthetic movements and socio-cultural theories.

This monograph, updated from a controversial doctoral thesis at RMIT University, Melbourne, was compiled to help rescue Snelling from the obscurity that was generated by his younger rival architects in 1950s–1960s Sydney and notable later writers about mid-century Sydney architecture. The first section (Chapters 1–5) provides a general biography of Snelling’s adventurous and glamorous pan-Pacific life. In the second section, his oeuvre is explained across the disciplines of furniture design (Chapter 6), commercial interiors (Chapter 7), and architecture and environmental design (Chapter 8). Also, his points of relevance and significance to certain major architecture and design theories and mid-century modern movements – including the ‘battle of the styles’ and ‘a new eclecticism’ (Robin Boyd, 1951), ‘American glamour’ in modern architecture (Alice T. Friedman, 2010), ‘critical regionalism’ (Kenneth Frampton, 1983), ‘good life modernism’ (Mark Jarzombek, 1990) and ‘the Sydney school’ (Milo Dunphy, 1962) – are posited in the introductory essays of Chapters 6–8 and the Conclusion. Snelling’s known architecture and interiors projects are listed on page 243. Thanks to a digital reproductions partnership with the State Library of New South Wales, this book includes more than 150 images of his original magazine



I.1 Studio portrait of Douglas Snelling, taken in Sydney, ca. early 1940s, photographer unknown, Snelling Estate.

publicity and projects. (The architecture was photographed mainly by Max Dupain, Sydney's answer to Julius Shulman, and early furniture and interiors were documented by Ray Leighton.) The bibliography includes separate lists of author-attributed and non-bylined books and articles which illuminate Snelling, and suggestions for further reading to broaden interpretations of his key contexts.

Douglas Snelling: Pan-Pacific Modern Design and Architecture is being published by Routledge to mark the centenary year of Snelling's birth in the river port town of Gravesend, England, during the First World War. It provides readers with detailed personal, professional and project information, and basic comparisons and context insights. Many opportunities remain for historians and theorists of Pacific modernism to exploit this compilation of information to strengthen their own domains of knowledge and debate.

Davina Jackson
Sydney 2016

PART I

Life



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Childhood 1916–1937

At the height of World War I in early 1916, when French and German armies had just begun the tumultuous Battle of Verdun, future architect Douglas Burrage Snelling was born at 18 Russell Road in the ancient English village of Gravesend, Kent. His father, Albert Edward Snelling, was noted on the 24 February birth certificate as a twenty-seven-year-old journeyman bootmaker. His mother was Ethel May Snelling (née Burrage). While nothing has been found about their activities at Eastbourne, it seems clear that the family left England when Douglas was young. His three sons believe that Albert, Ethel, and Douglas lived briefly during the early 1920s in Quito, the capital of Ecuador, while Albert helped to establish a footwear factory.¹ Certainly the trio migrated to New Zealand in the English summer of 1924, when Albert was thirty-five and Douglas was eight. Ink-scripted passenger lists for the Savill & Albion Company steamship MV Corinthic show that they were registered by Customs in Auckland on 23 July, toward the end of a voyage that began in Southampton and terminated in the New Zealand capital, Wellington.² Other records for the same ship, mastered by Captain Frank Hart, suggest that its usual route was via Colon and Panama, which allows speculation that the family may have boarded the Corinthic at the end of their possible stay in Quito. All three Snellings were contracted for the journey on Ticket No A981.³

Public records do not illuminate the family's first four years in New Zealand, but some clues have surfaced. According to Albert's 1962 obituary in Wellington's morning newspaper, *The Dominion*, he was first employed by a national chain of footwear stores, R. Hannah & Co, as a salesman in their Cuba Street (central city) shop. Hannah & Co has not recorded its history, but other public information⁴ suggests that Albert remained with the company for most of his career, as a salesman and manager of stores in several provincial New Zealand cities. In 1926, they were listed in a Wellington street directory at 328 Tinakori Road, Thorndon. This was a weatherboard shophouse (see Figure 1.1) on the main street of a hill suburb above Wellington city.

The Snellings next are listed in the 1928 Cleaves Directory for Auckland province, living at 95 Te Aroha Street, Claudelands, Hamilton. This suburb, on the eastern side of



1.1 The 1926 Wellington street directory listed Snelling's parents at 328 Tinakori Road, Thorndon; now the address of a popular restaurant, author photograph, ca. 2003.

class, suggesting good levels of concentration on study. Although no record has been found of Douglas excelling in athletic and team sports, he appears fit in his teenage portraits and would have had many opportunities to ride horses, swim, fish for trout, play tennis, sail small boats and paddle canoes. These are common pursuits for children living in New Zealand. Also he won several golf club trophies, according to clippings in the family's scrapbook of his activities during the 1930s and early 1940s.⁶

In 1930, at age fourteen, Douglas enrolled in Form 3 for the Classical (Languages, Mathematics, Science) course at Hamilton Boys' High School near the family home. At some stage later that year, his father was transferred to manage the Hannah shop in Matamata, about 150 km west, and Douglas was enrolled at Matamata Junior High School. A few months later, the family transferred to Wanganui, 533 km south of Hamilton on the windy southwest coast of New Zealand's North Island. For Albert, this move might have represented another Hannah & Co shop transfer, but for Douglas, it marked the transition from his last few years at school to the beginning of his professional career as a designer.

The Snellings first lived in the centre of Wanganui at 58 Nelson Street, which leads to Cooks Gardens, including a tennis and squash club. It is only two streets away from the city's main intersection of Maria Place and Victoria Avenue, and only a short walk from Douglas's new school. Later the family moved to a bungalow on the other side of the river, at 22 Jones Street⁷ (see Figure 1.2). When Douglas joined Wanganui

the Waikato River which bisects the city, was an early twentieth-century subdivision of land previously settled by Maori tribes. In the same year, twelve-year-old Douglas was enrolled at Hamilton East Primary School on the corner of Grey and Dawson Streets, near the Waikato and only a short walk from the family's timber house. Archives New Zealand holds Board of Education records of his academic performance for that year as a pupil of Standard 5A.⁵ His best subject was Drawing (22/25), then Arithmetic (82/100), Spelling (21/25), and Writing (20/25). He had lower grades in Reading and Composition (both 70/100) and nearly failed in Grammar (26/50). These results suggest that Douglas was gifted with the classic combination of talents – artistic, mathematic and written – needed for success as an architect. Family photographs show him as a handsome adolescent. His attendance record was well above average for his



1.2 This 'California bungalow' at 22 Jones Street, Wanganui, was an early 1930s home of Snelling's family, author photograph, ca. 2003.

Technical High, he was placed in Form 3A for the remainder of 1930, then in Form 4A in 1931, learning English, Mathematics, Latin, French, Chemistry and Physics, as well as several hours of Music, History and 'Drill'. Some insight into Snelling's school days is given in a 1950 report published in Australia's *People* magazine. In the most informative (and colourful) personality profile of his career, his childhood was described in these terms:

As a youngster, he had little time for small-boy pleasures like playing cricket and 'cops and robbers.' He spent those precious after-school hours 'designing' and building toy houses. As far back as he can remember, he always wanted to be a designer.⁸

On 2 February 1932, Douglas (aged sixteen) was given a free position in the senior school. But for the first time, he was placed in a lower class, Form 7C. Was his academic performance now slipping? Did the school's administrators want to place free students lower in status than fee-paying pupils? Another explanation might be that Douglas was beginning to focus his attention more seriously on artistic rather than scholarly pursuits. In the school records for this year, he was listed for only twenty-nine units (hours) of classroom time compared with fifty-four units for the two previous years in junior school. He dropped Latin, Physics and Music and cut back on English, but retained similar levels of study for Mathematics, History and French. This workload would have allowed him generous time for various commercial art projects. In 1933, he was taking six hours a week of evening art classes.

By this time, Snelling's artistic abilities included dramatic colour juxtapositions, adventurous typography on signs and posters, sketching cartoon likenesses of people,

and creating exotic three-dimensional displays. From a newspaper report in his scrapbook,⁹ he was adept also at the then-unconventional medium of pastels. During 1932 or 1933, Snelling began working as a designer, first tackling small poster design and visual merchandising projects at home with local shops and cinemas as clients. In a July 1937 article noting the imminent departure of Snelling for a job in New York (that never crystallized), the unnamed Wanganui correspondent for *New Zealand Free Lance* praised Snelling's artistic and entrepreneurial abilities (see Figure 1.3):

To see his posters, you would hardly believe that he hasn't had a lesson in his life; but from a small boy he lived with a pencil between his fingers. From a mere hobby, starting four years ago doing posters for the picture theatres, he now employs two other lads and they are all as busy as bees. . . .

In the summer, he and his boys got a great kick out of designing a stunning 'float' which was entered in the carnival procession. The whole thing was done in lemon yellow, orange and black, with glitter green, white and silver finish.¹⁰

Snelling also saw opportunities to exploit the antipodean popularity of the British monarchy. For example, he sold posters and town decorations for the 1934

NEW ZEALAND FREE LANCE. July 7, 1937



The Coronation meant good business for 21-year-old Wanganui employer Douglas Snelling. You see him here (on left in overalls) with his assistants in their workshop.

A Plunge with Posters

Self-Taught Display Artist Packs Up for New York

By the Wanganui Correspondent of the "New Zealand Free Lance."

[I]t has been publicly said that some 4000 of our bright young people leave New Zealand each year. Well, here is one of them—for Douglas Snelling, just twenty-one, has made a name for himself in his home town of Wanganui as a commercial artist, and he is off to America before the year is

were they, that orders poured in, and he had to employ a carpenter to build the structural displays. One store ordered replicas of the Imperial State Crown, the Orb and the Sceptre (in the foreground of the picture) which helped win for it a first prize in the Coronation window dressing competition.

1.3 Snelling's first significant publicity as a promising display and graphic designer in Wanganui, New Zealand: *The New Zealand Free Lance*, 1937, 'Plunge with posters', 7 July, p. 11, Snelling Estate.

Wanganui visit of Prince Henry, the Duke of Gloucester (third son of King George V), who had arrived in New Zealand to open a session of Parliament in Wellington. *New Zealand Free Lance* explained that although he ‘missed a golden opportunity’ to design decorative signs for King George’s Silver Jubilee in 1935, he built some spectacular displays for the Coronation of King Edward VIII in 1936.¹¹

So excellent were they that orders poured in and he had to employ a carpenter to build the structural displays. One store ordered replicas of the Imperial State Crown, the Orb and the Sceptre, which helped win for it a first prize in the Coronation window dressing competition.¹²

Already, the young artist was developing bold ambitions to go much further as a designer, indicated by these recollections given to *People* in 1950:

When he matriculated at 17, he told his parents he had decided to become a great architect. They received this intelligence with the kind of detached interest normal parents show in a kid’s ambition to be a great film star. But young Douglas was obdurate, refusing to take any interest in the professions suggested by his father. The boy was smart enough to realize that, if he wanted to become an architect, he would have to get there on his own steam. Disregarding gentle ragging from friends and family, he set up a ‘designing’ business in his home town, Wanganui, North Island. Over the door of his shop hung a sign, Douglas B. Snelling, Designer. This appears today on his furniture. For a moderate fee, he offered to design anything from a pin box to an office building. He worked night and day over his drawing board and, recalling these early years, says proudly that not one of his Wanganui customers was dissatisfied. By the time he was 18, he had saved enough money to go to America.¹³

While *People* reported that he had saved enough money to go to America by the time he was eighteen, *Wises Directory* still places him in Wanganui during 1936 and 1937 as a signwriter at 105 Gugton Street.¹⁴ Local newspapers reported his departure for the United States in mid-1937, when he was twenty-one. This journey marked his second key transition from a provincial family childhood to his cosmopolitan adult life.

Already he was becoming successful enough to attract admiration from associates and staff at his old schools. In the family-held scrapbook, there is a short report (dated ‘about 1932’) of him returning to Hamilton East Primary School to speak to ‘150 senior pupils . . . about modern ideas in planning and executing posters’. It was noted that ‘his address to the children was followed with keen interest.’¹⁵ In September 1937 he also lectured on ‘the art of display and showcard writing’ in a business course offered by the Wanganui Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA).¹⁶ Despite his short stay at Hamilton Boys’ High School, his later progress was noted in the old boys’ sections of the school annuals for the late 1930s. For example, in December 1936, it was mentioned that he had a sign-writing studio in Wanganui.¹⁷ In December 1938, he had ‘made a name for himself in commercial art and is now in California.’ And in December 1939: ‘D. Snelling, who had a varied and most interesting career in America, is now publicity manager for Warner Bros, the film people.’¹⁸

Although the principal of a profitable business (during the Great Depression), Snelling had no intention to continue his career in Wanganui. He had grown up in at

least seven homes in different towns of England, New Zealand and perhaps Equador, and it seems he was not burdened by childhood roots. This provincial city (then only 28,000 citizens) appeared too small and unsophisticated to sustain his curiosity and artistic, entrepreneurial and social abilities.¹⁹

Snelling's adolescent impulse to design posters for cinemas indicates that he was strongly attracted to the movies. For a teenager living in sub-Antarctic latitudes, American films must have been a rich source of new creative ideas. Hollywood was becoming the twentieth century's most exciting realm of commerce, one of only a few growth industries during the years following the 1929 crash of the New York stock market. Los Angeles studios were paying more money to impressive youngsters than could be earned on the lower ranks of most other vocational ladders. Then (as now), Hollywood films were conceived as propaganda tools to promote American glamour, philosophical values and products. Snelling became magnetized by the new world of the screen, and he began to plan a film career in America.

In 1937, when Snelling was twenty-one, his American ambitions were noted in local and national newspapers. At this time, according to the *New Zealand Free Lance*, 4,000 'of our bright young people' were leaving New Zealand each year for jobs overseas.²⁰ Although quoted in the magazine's 7 July issue that he had work lined up in New York, Snelling actually left Auckland on 5 October 1937 as a passenger on the RMS Aorangi, heading via Fiji and Hawaii for Vancouver on the west coast of Canada. On this voyage, he wrote to his parents (who supplied the letter to a reporter for one of the Wanganui newspapers²¹) that he spent a day in Suva, where he drank kava that tasted 'like dish-water', had lunch in a Chinese restaurant, and saw a Fijian funeral. He also watched mail being dropped from the ship in a tin can to three inhabitants of Canton Island. His recollections of Honolulu included gun-wearing customs officers, traffic 'going in the wrong direction', Waikiki Beach, and 'wonderful' hotels. These first exposures to contrasts of modern Western culture and traditional tribal customs in two capitals of Polynesian culture later were reflected in his style of living and key designs for houses and interiors in Sydney. By early November he had arrived in Vancouver, which he described to his parents as 'a very live centre, with every second shop being a café'.²² Vancouver was his launch pad for a campaign to triumph in the capital of show business.

NOTES

- 1 Sydney: SLNSW MLMSS 8801/01, *Portrait*, 1940, 'Australia's Amateur Hour: starts Thursday November 28', November, p. 6. This article in the J. Walter Thompson Sydney agency newsletter noted that its new Sydney publicist, Douglas Snelling, was taken to South America by his parents as a child. However three of Snelling's 1950s–1960s architectural associates – John Hunt, Jim Whitelock, and Graeme Hewett – did not remember him talking about Equador, when interviewed by the author 2003–2006.
- 2 Auckland: Archives New Zealand, shipping arrivals, BBAO 5552 1924 (accessed ca. February 2003).
- 3 Archives NZ, BBAO 5552 1924.
- 4 Auckland: Auckland Public Library, Wisers' and Cleaves' Directories, and electoral rolls (accessed ca. 2003).

- 5 Auckland: Archives New Zealand, Auckland Province Board of Education, School Inspectors' reports, YCAF 4135, 134a, 1928 (accessed ca. February 2003).
- 6 Sydney: The Estate of Douglas B. Snelling Architect (hereafter 'Snelling Estate').
- 7 Both these houses were suburban bungalows, influenced by Wright's early 'house beautiful' concepts and Arts and Crafts precedents in California and Chicago.
- 8 *People*, 1950, 'A young man with ideas', 10 May, pp. 25–27.
- 9 *New Zealand Free Lance* (Wanganui correspondent), 1937, 'A plunge with posters', 7 July, p. 11.
- 10 *NZ Free Lance*, 1937, 'A plunge with posters'.
- 11 *NZ Free Lance*, 1937, 'A plunge with posters'.
- 12 *NZ Free Lance*, 1937, 'A plunge with posters'.
- 13 *People*, 1950, 'A young man'.
- 14 More likely it was Guyton Street, a major city road intersecting Nelson Street, where the Snelling family first lived before moving to 22 Jones Street by 1936 (according to *Wises' Directory* of that year).
- 15 Sydney: Snelling Estate, scrapbook clipping, 'Address to school children', perhaps published in a Hamilton newspaper between late 1932 and 1935 (hand-dated 'about October 1932').
- 16 Sydney: Snelling Estate, scrapbook clipping.
- 17 Hamilton Boys High School, personal communications, ca. February 2003.
- 18 Sydney: SLNSW MLMSS 8801/01 and Snelling Estate, Snelling's business card as publicity manager for Warner Bros in Wellington.
- 19 Sydney: Snelling Estate, scrapbook clipping, Anon., ca. 1937, untitled, perhaps published in the *Wanganui Herald* or *Wanganui Chronicle*, announcing Snelling's departure for Los Angeles, noting that 'he is well-known in tennis and badminton circles in the city. He was a foundation member of the Wanganui Optimists Club'.
- 20 *NZ Free Lance*, 1937, 'A plunge with posters'.
- 21 Sydney: Snelling Estate, scrapbook clipping, Anon., ca. early 1938, 'Visit to America: Wanganui man's views: letters from Mr D. Snelling: study of commercial art'.
- 22 Snelling Estate, ca. 1938, 'Visit to America'.