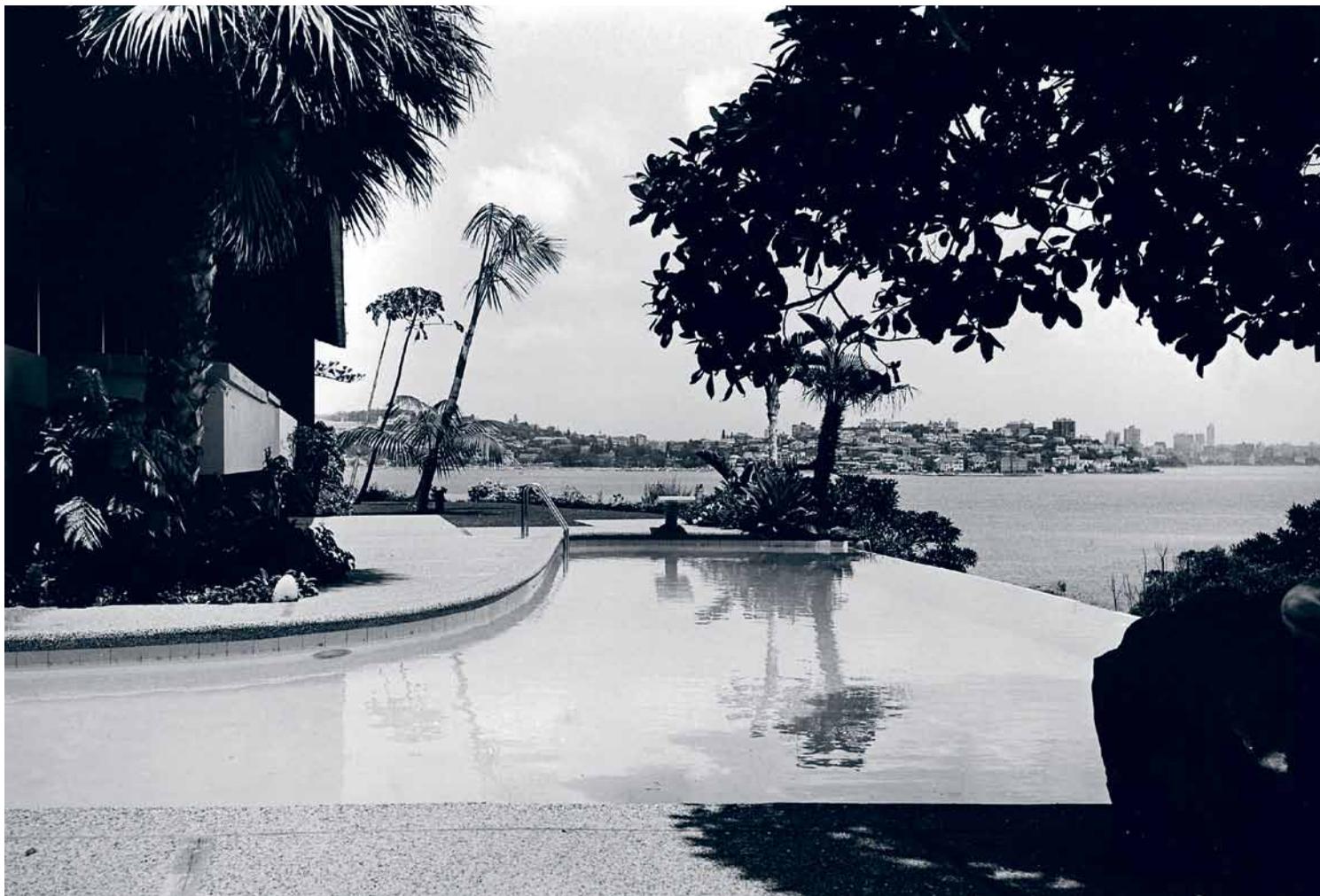


PROFILING THE LIFE AND WORK OF CREATORS AROUND THE GLOBE

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## Transferring modern and ethnic themes around the Pacific, DOUGLAS SNELLING introduced mid-century glamour to Oceania.

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**ABOVE** Snelling delivered Australia's first spill-edge swimming pool to the Kelly House 2 at Vaucluse in 1965, using technical advice from Los Angeles architect John Lautner, who built the world's first modern 'infinity' pool in 1963

**OPPOSITE ABOVE** Snelling's 1964 perspective of the Kelly House 2, built on a steep waterfront site at Vaucluse

**OPPOSITE BELOW** Douglas Snelling as a young commercial artist, taken by an unknown studio in Sydney, 1944

Exactly a century after his birth in London's docklands, Douglas Snelling (1916-1985) remains a misunderstood translator of glamorous American modernity to his adopted homelands of Australia and New Zealand. Yet his diverse achievements as a designer and architect are vital to the cultural histories of both countries – and to growing knowledge of mid-century modernism around the Pacific.

His international career – spanning the mid-30s to the mid-70s – helps to illuminate how American modern aesthetics spread west across the Pacific, to influence post-colonial development in the antipodes and Asia. He rapidly transferred new publicity and design concepts from Hollywood to Wanganui and Wellington in the late 30s, and interpreted American modern furniture, interiors, architecture and landscape advances in Sydney and Noumea from 1940 to the early 70s – before retiring to Hawaii in 1977.

At the height of his architectural career, he was a prominent South Pacific exponent of the tropical ethnic paradise movement that Los Angeles researcher Sven Kirsten recently labelled 'tiki style' and 'Polynesian pop'.

**WORDS DAVINA JACKSON  
PHOTOGRAPHY MAX DUPAIN,  
SNELLING ESTATE**

With his major 'fantasy' residences and holiday resort concepts, Snelling elaborated Frank Lloyd Wright's organic modern architectural principles with pseudo-thatched roofs in eccentric forms, and juxtaposed Garrett Eckbo's modern (massed and layered) landscape planting concepts with spectacular California swimming pools, expansive sandstone-paved terraces and traditional Japanese water gardens including ponds of koi carp. He adapted glamorous interior design and atmospheric lighting concepts from his late 30s visits to Hollywood film sets and 40s shops and offices by New York designers including Morris Lapidus and Richard Kelly.

Since his death, Snelling has been recognised mainly as a furniture designer – but this was a minor facet of his multi-disciplinary accomplishments. In 1945 and 1946, he prototyped and sold the first range of modern chairs, tables and storage furniture to be nationally marketed in Australia after the Second World War. These timber chairs, with interlaced webbing seats and backs, were 'rough' copies of early 40s H.G. Knoll (New York) models by Jens Risom and Ralph Rapson (which themselves were diminished versions of early 30s hand-crafted bentwood designs by Alvar Aalto in Finland and Bruno Mathsson in Sweden).

Snelling placed his furniture in most of the restaurants and shops that he designed in the late 40s. Inspired by photographs of American store interiors by Morris Ketchum Jr., Victor Gruen, Morris Lapidus and others, he installed modern plate glass storefronts and created customer-enticing interiors with obliquely angled cabinets, wavy timber ceilings, novel paint combinations, dramatic lighting effects, and mirrors to multiply dazzling reflections of the merchandise.



His first fit-outs, completed 1946–1948 – notably the Etam Glove Shop, Dasi Pen Shop, Sydney Snow clothing store and American National Club – were published in trade magazines *Decoration and Glass*, *Rydges*, and *Building and Engineering*. In 1949 and 1950, two of his first house concepts were featured (as models and plans) in the legendary California magazine *Arts and Architecture*. The Melbourne-edited journal *Architecture and Arts* strongly promoted Snelling's buildings through the 50s.

Snelling was more savvy about publicity than most architects and designers of his time. His creative and communications skills emerged during his last years of high school in mid-30s Wanganui, New Zealand, when he created window displays, street parade floats and banners, and cinema movie posters for local retailers. For his skill drawing cartoons, he was offered an animation job at the Walt Disney studio in Hollywood – but his visa conditions forced him into six months of freelance work drawing caricatures of stars in costume on film sets. His Hollywood experiences during 1937–38 later influenced his strategies for glamorous Sydney interiors and gardens.



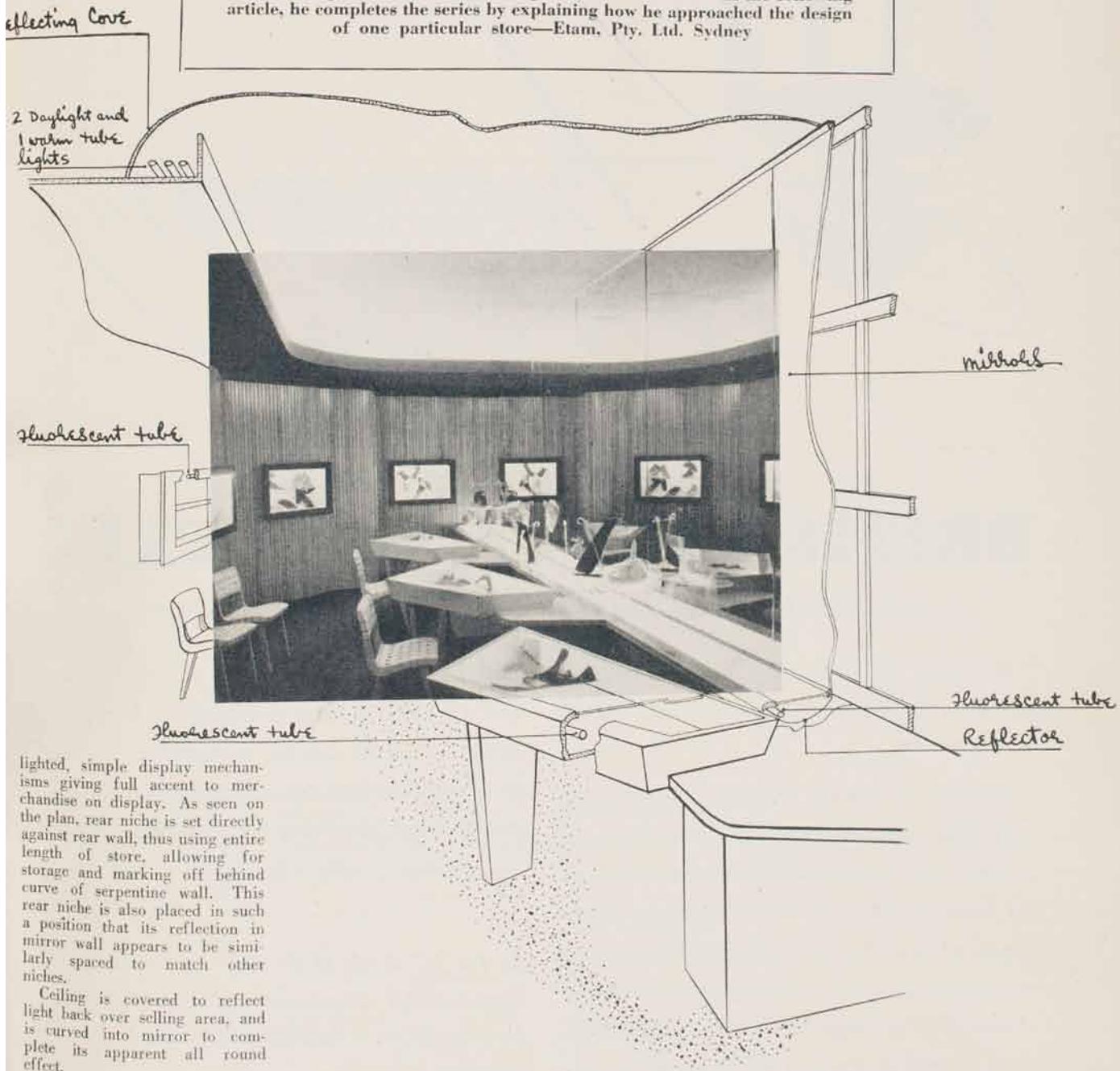
## DOUGLAS SNELLING

**BORN** Gravesend, UK  
**LIVED** Eastbourne (UK), Wanganui (NZ), Los Angeles, Wellington, Sydney, Honolulu  
**WORKED** Douglas Snelling Architect

# A Problem Of Design

BY DOUGLAS B. SNELLING

Last month, Mr. Snelling of Douglas B. Snelling Associates, Store Planning Unit & Designers, discussed the design of the retail store. In the following article, he completes the series by explaining how he approached the design of one particular store—Etam, Pty. Ltd. Sydney



lighted, simple display mechanisms giving full accent to merchandise on display. As seen on the plan, rear niche is set directly against rear wall, thus using entire length of store, allowing for storage and marking off behind curve of serpentine wall. This rear niche is also placed in such a position that its reflection in mirror wall appears to be similarly spaced to match other niches.

Ceiling is covered to reflect light back over selling area, and is curved into mirror to complete its apparent all round effect.

## Store Front

Store front has been opened to make entire shop an integrated display unit right on the street front. The forward window display and store name are carefully treated to allow direct view

through. Window is directly lighted by six concealed incandescent light fixtures, each 200 watts. Under to-day's extreme shortage of light fixtures, these were fabricated from aluminium saucepans with bottoms turned

out and concentric louvres inserted.

Even under our present adverse conditions, it is a challenge to reputable designers to achieve maximum results with minimum funds. Through full use of

color, texture, simplicity of form and fixtures, stores may be built on quite economical budgets. It may also be said here that a design job that does not return proportionately increased sales profits is not a complete success.

Snelling parlayed his six-month Los Angeles sojourn into eighteen months of New Zealand celebrity as a radio commentator, magazine columnist and Warner Bros film publicist in Wellington. After sailing to Sydney in 1940, he worked through the war in electronic equipment factories and designed the streamlined Bakelite shell for one of Australia's first post-war radios.

Snelling returned to Los Angeles in 1947 with his first wife, New Zealand heiress Nancy Springhall, and briefly worked as an interior designer with Beverly Hills architect Douglas Honnold and his younger associate, John Lautner. This office was creating flamboyant retail pavilions; pioneering a gravity-defying architectural style that was later named 'Googie' (after a Lautner-designed coffee shop in West Hollywood).

After Snelling left the Honnold office, he and his wife drove through the California and Arizona desert on a pilgrimage to inspirational architectural sites – including Richard Neutra's then-new Kaufmann Desert House in Palm Springs and Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin West desert camp near Scottsdale.

On return to Sydney in early 1948, he studied architecture at home to gradually pass the professional registration exams in 1952 – while expanding his business to include more buildings.

His Hay house in St Ives (1949-53), Kelly House 1 in Bellevue Hill (1953-55), Keith Smith house in Mosman (1955-58), Assef house in Bellevue Hill (1964), Little house in Clareville (1964-65) and Kelly House 2 in Vaucluse (1965-66) all included Wright's substantial stone fireplaces and extensive use of cedar, with face brick walls and sliding glass doors to outdoor terraces. Some projects (notably Hay) also exploited

Neutra's pinwheel floor planning; the Smith house used triangular structural geometry recalling some of Lautner's Googie tactics, and Snelling's kitchens included sliding shoji screens, as favoured by Gordon Drake.

Snelling's oeuvre of more than 70 projects also included high-quality office buildings, factories and apartment towers: notably the Hartford Fire Insurance Company at 49 Margaret Street (1952-53), Armco Steel Company in Kirrawee (1953-56), the J.H. Liddle and Epstein office building on Macquarie Street at East Circular Quay (1954-56), the Bibaringa 'homes in the sky' tower at Double Bay (1962-63) and the Roslyn Gardens Bachelor Flats block in Elizabeth Bay (1963). He also built Australia's first modern infinity pool – using technical advice from his former work colleague, John Lautner – at the Kelly House 2 overlooking Sydney Harbour at Vaucluse (1966). During his final years of practice, he built two major houses in Noumea (1968-69) and designed unbuilt schemes for holiday

resorts in Vanuatu and Fiji (1970-72).

Despite – or because of – his diverse talents, achievements and charisma, Snelling was marginalised by younger Sydney architects and their coteries. Contemporary academics in both Australia and New Zealand still decline to support any exhibition of the splendid Max Dupain photographs of his buildings – so Snelling's oeuvre remains mysterious in this centenary year of his birth.

*Davina Jackson is a visiting research fellow with Goldsmiths, University of London. A new update of her controversial PhD thesis on Snelling is contracted with British publishers Ashgate-Routledge and her douglas-snelling.com website is archived with the National Library of Australia.*

**PREVIOUS** One of Snelling's illustrated articles for a 1947 issue of Rydges business magazine, explaining new trends in shop design, highlighting his interior of the Etam glove shop in central Sydney

**BELOW** Curved cocktail bar between the kitchen and billiards room off the pool deck of the Arthur F. Little house, Clareville Beach, 1965

