King George V Hospital – the grand dame of Australian modern architecture turns 70

The King George V Memorial Hospital for Mothers and Babies (KGV) in Camperdown – with its elegant, sleek lines, meticulous detailing and spacious light-filled interiors - created a sensation when it was officially opened in 1941.

Considered one of the most modern maternal facilities in Australia at the time, more than 3000 people turned out in their finest to witness the glittering event.

Now, 70 years later, the iconic building is still turning heads and considered one of the finest examples of modern hospital architecture in Australia.

“At the time, King George V Memorial Hospital was definitely seen as an expression of the new radical approach to hospital design in Australia,” Royal Prince Alfred Hospital (RPA) Museum and Archive Director, Dr Kathi Hillier said.

“The building reflected a new emphasis on healing through light, access to fresh air and sunlight. It features clean European styling, generous windows, and easy access from the rooms to the balconies that wrap around the building.

“Overall, the design elements employed aimed to create a positive, open, healing environment that would facilitate speedy recovery from illness,” she said.

KGV, named after King George V of the United Kingdom and the British Dominions, was the result of a long campaign by the RPA Hospital Board to build a maternity facility in Sydney’s west to accommodate the growing number of women seeking hospital facilities to give birth.

Sydney Local Health Network (SLHN) Chief Executive, Dr Teresa Anderson, said more than 263,000 babies were born at KGV from 1941 to 2002, before maternal services were relocated to new women and babies facilities across the road as part of a $258 million upgrade of RPA.

“KGV holds a special place in the hearts and memories of thousands of women, their children and their families,” Dr Anderson said.

“As a building, KGV was designed so well that over the decades it has been able to adapt to changing health needs.

“KGV perfectly served its original function as a world-class maternal facility and now, 70 years later, the building is home to a range of SLHN clinical services such as drug and alcohol, sexual assault, mental health and community health,” she said.

Designed by famed Australian architects Stephenson & Turner, the building was awarded the NSW Sulman Award for Public Architecture in 1942. The prize is presented by the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (NSW) in recognition of a building of exceptional merit erected in NSW or ACT.
Three imposing statues created by Hungarian sculptor Andor Meszaros erected around the Hospital, add to the site’s uniqueness.

The first, "Statue to Maternity", was unveiled in 1944, the "Surgeon" in 1945, and the final statue of King George V, which stands directly in front of the entrance, was unveiled in 1947.

In 1948, Meszaros prepared a bronze medallion based on his sculpture “Maternity” for parents of babies born at the Hospital.

“The front of the medallion depicts a mother triumphantly holding her baby while the reverse side depicts a large mother gum tree protectively leaning over her new baby gum and a space left for the baby’s name,” Dr Hillier said.

“The artist explained that the mother pressed the baby to her protective body just as the mother tree shelters the little tree from raging gales and the scorching sun. The medallions represent a moment of triumph in womanhood and the great role of motherhood and babies,” she said.

On either side of KGV’s front entrance, there are identical mural plaques entitled “Bambini” and “Mother and Baby”, the former based on a 15th century Della Robbia mural situated at the Foundling Hospital in Florence. Both murals were made by Danish sculptor Otto Steen.

* From early May until the end of 2011, a public display focusing on the opening of KGV and other happenings of 1941 will be established in the front foyer of RPA.

* RPA staff are also holding a celebration dinner inviting all friends and past and present staff of KGV to attend.