The history of Bates Smart dates back to the 1850s and founder Joseph Reed, who was responsible for many of Melbourne’s most iconic buildings, including the Royal Exhibition Building and Wilson Hall at the University of Melbourne. A shining example of Gothic Revival, the hall was the epicentre of the university until it was lost to flames in 1952.

After great controversy, it was decided that a new building would be designed. Bates Smart was appointed to design the new hall which was completed in 1956. Designed by Sir Osborn McCutcheon, the new hall was completed under the supervision of the firm’s emerging young star, architect Robert Dunster. The renowned Australian sculptor Tom Bass was also engaged and provided the copper mural relief over the entrance titled ‘Trials of Socrates’.

In the 1960s the trio of McCutcheon, Dunster and Bass were reunited for the design and construction of the Australian Embassy in Washington. McCutcheon as designer, Dunster as the on-site project architect and Bass providing the sculptural bronze coat of arms.

With the next generation of Bates Smart now having the opportunity to work on the new Australian Embassy in Washington, it is a particularly poignant time to reflect on our history.

Melbourne Studio Director Tim Leslie sat down with Robert Dunster to reflect on some of the firm’s history and the design of the 1969 Australian Embassy in Washington D.C.

How did you come to work for Bates Smart?
I went to Melbourne University and got a Bachelor of Architecture and Diploma of Town and Regional Planning and straight out of university Sir Osborn McCutcheon asked me to join the firm. It was really quite moving that he was interested enough to do that, and what is more the job he had in mind was Wilson Hall.

Tell us about Wilson Hall?
Wilson Hall had already been designed, so I wasn’t involved in the design. They had already done the draft working drawings. So when I joined the firm they were about to do the documentation. My first job was to draw all the drawings. So when I joined the firm they were about to do the documentation. My first job was to draw all the drawings. So when you see the drawings of Wilson Hall, in the files, hand coloured prints, those were all done by me. So that was my first year’s work, drawing all that up, then it went to tender. At that point the job captain left, so suddenly there was nobody else to run the job except me. Now that was a bit startling as an idea, even to the partners of the day I think. One year out of university! They did appoint someone else to be officially involved in running the contract, but that didn’t happen initially, and so I started out doing it and by the time he came along I was running it quite well, so it was really just a token role for a few months and then he dropped out and I went on. So basically I supervised the construction of Wilson Hall, which was a fascinating job to be involved with, and in those days there was still very much a severe control of all building materials, and restrictions on what you could do.

There was a concentration on housing, factories, hospitals, offices, but nothing like a decorated Wilson Hall. Everybody did recognise that it was a tragedy that the old one had burnt down and it was agreed that money should be spent rebuilding it. The original intention had been to restore the original, and the original drawings were still in our files we could have got them out and built it exactly as it was, but they wanted it bigger, which was difficult to do.

The artwork of Australian sculptor Tom Bass provides a delightful physical connection between Wilson Hall and the Australian Embassy in Washington. How did this occur, did Bates Smart engage him for both or was it just serendipity?
Os [Sir Osborn McCutcheon] would have been the one that picked him originally. In those days the architect was much more influential than they are now.
What was Sir Osborn McCutcheon like to work with?

Os he was a real character. He was very down to earth. He got into the business of actually designing. He was working with his pencil and sketching away like mad, in between weird and wonderful memoranda of things. Good fun as well. Always had a bit of humour, which was nice. We used to hover outside his office when we wanted to talk to him about something and he would look up and say “three and a half minutes”, and three and a half minutes later we would come back and stand there. He would probably let you in then. It was good fun. He used to rush down the office with yellow trace [sketching paper] streaming behind him, he would have had a new thought about something and wanted to get it down.

One time he lost his voice which was a fun experience. He would write things down and we would [cheekily] write back the answer to him [rather than speak].

He was not in any way overbearing, but very much in control.

I suppose the practice set up after the war, was really his, he was always the dominant force and he was the big shareholder.

It is hard to comprehend today what Melbourne was like after the war can you provide some insight?

Shortages of building materials. Things like steel. You had to adjust your design as you went along, depending on what steel sections were available that month. If you wanted to wait you could, but if you didn’t want to wait you had to make substitutions.

At this period at the practice, Os was building the firm’s skills. We had structural for a long while, but then he added mechanical, lifts, hydraulics so by the time the Chancery came along we were given everything, we designed everything in it. Everything was ours. Not only the design, but the structure, services, furniture, paintings - everything was given to Os to do. It was an absolutely complete commission.

What was the external design approach for the new embassy?

The building wasn’t going to be distinctly Australian in its architectural appearance, it was to be a building that fitted into the public buildings of Washington. Hence the idea of the marble cladding. A good friend to the neighbouring buildings. [The marble was off-white Tennessee Marble, the same marble as used on the Smithsonian, National Gallery of Art, the Jefferson and Lincoln Memorials and many other distinguished DC buildings]

What did this project mean to Bates Smart?

There was a prestige to this building. It was a feather in the cap project.

What are some of your lasting memories of that time in Washington?

Obviously the opening of the building. Os came over and so did Robin Boyd who had curated the opening exhibition in the Chancery.

Washington was an interesting place to be. A broad cross section of people. This broad mix had a funny side too, because things like snow created real chaos. We had people who lived next to us who came from Chicago and they could never understand why Washington was completely stopped by half an inch of snow. They said “try 30 feet”. But because of all the strange mix of people living there for their embassies, including people from tropical countries, there were lots of people who had no idea of how to go about driving on snow.

Another memory is being trapped inside the Chancery during the riots after Martin Luther King Jr was assassinated. We had a colleague who has just arrived from Australia and caught the bus in that day. Buildings were on fire, streets were filled with people and the National Guard, and outside the Chancery the roads were at a stand still – it was quite a first impression for him.

Now Tim, show me what you are doing to my Chancery?