

Sat. July 5, 1947.

WHY NOT MAKE IT BETTER?

VICTORIAN MODERN by Robin Boyd (Melbourne: Victorian Architectural Students' Society).
ART APPRECIATION by R. Haughton James (Melbourne: F. W. Cheshire Pty. Ltd.)

One of the essentials of progress on the art front in Australia—all the arts, "fine" and otherwise—is a vigorous and healthy criticism.

Here are two books which supply it. Mr James's book deals with art in general and ranges from Rembrandt to radio sets.

Mr Boyd, with a large number of excellent illustrations, talks about architecture in Victoria from wattle-and-daub to pre-fabrication (new style).

Both have plenty to say about bad art, bad taste and misuse of materials.

MR BOYD'S book, an ingenious compilation indeed in these days, when the hair of publishers is likely to turn grey in the course of their struggles with production problems, tells, with the aid of line drawings and photographs and an urbane and amusing text, the story of our buildings and their builders from the spring afternoon in 1836 when Samuel Jackson, a pioneer craftsman, stepped from the Launceston boat into the Yarra mud to begin the architectural conquest of Victoria.

As Mr Boyd remarks, Victoria missed the colonial Georgian period of New South Wales and Tasmania. The story goes from a simpler rustic style through the unhappy enterprise of late Victorianism and art nouveau to the present day.

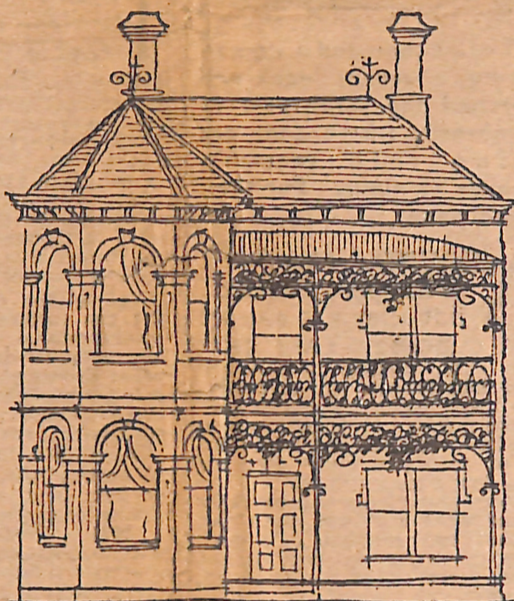
The author tells us about some of the significant architects and what their contributions were. Burley Griffin has an important place in the hierarchy.

Griffin's Capitol ceiling, Mr Boyd says, was original. But one seems to remember being told by one of the Phillips brothers that he suggested the idea to Griffin as a result of a decorative scheme he had seen in the United States; a small point.

Mr Boyd has some rather depressing things to say about the apparently largely unsuccessful struggles between architect and housebuilder.

In pre-fabrication, for instance, he says several projects were developed by Victorian architects. At birth they were simple, openly planned, and thoroughly progressive.

"Now they are changed. Back to the familiar



BOOM PERIOD — "The great asymmetrical front" as depicted by Robin Boyd.

MR HAUGHTON JAMES, whose book is one of Cheshire's "Quest" series, is concerned with art in the broadest sense of the term and with explaining to the layman what it means without becoming involved in a maze of technicalities and abstractions.

"If our lives are brutal and ugly," he says, "it is to a great extent because, individually, our need for beauty and purposefulness is frustrated."

"We suffer because we have put art on one side, stowed it away in the junk room at the back of our minds. We know our lives are greyer for it and are helpless."

Mr James wants to let a little light into the junk room and he succeeds admirably in doing it in a spirited and informative little book.

It evidently can't be expected, he remarks, that we should like all art of all sorts, nor even all the art of one artist. But when art is regarded as embracing all things designed and made, in their enormous profusion, as it must be, we should expect to find pleasure of some sort in a great deal of it.

Our job is to find further means of knowing good from bad.

Mr James takes a slam at debased standards generally.

"People go with the fashion," he says. "Badness in works of art comes mostly when the artist tries to please his public and accepts their standards of taste."

"Today gum trees are thought beautiful. A hundred years ago nobody thought anything of them. Actually they are beautiful and just as good subject-matter for art as studies of penicillin mould, which, though it has not yet appealed to any artist, is also exceedingly beautiful."

"Plastics are beautiful. Plastics treated to look like wood are a lie, filthy, a fake. Most plastic radio cases are bad art, fakes."

"Any timber is beautiful, but not when disguised as any other timber. . . . Machine imitation of handwork is a fake. Moulded glassware attempting to pass off as cut glass is dishonest and the effect disgusting."

"Moulded glass has its own natural forms within which it can be beautiful. Calf is a fine leather; impressed with the pattern of crocodile skin it becomes a fake and loses entirely its natural value. . . ."

"Down with fakes. Down with bogus-Elizabethan beams stuck on modern houses, down with enamel sheets fatuously masquerading as marble, down with dishonesty! We must challenge these things whether new or old."

And, Mr James adds, no criticism has been offered on the ground that an article is a commercial or an industrial product. Nor will it be. Everything made may be art, and pleasure found in its contemplation. Art snobbery which praises painting and sculpture and sneers at machine-made goods has its roots in ignorance and narrow-mindedness.

Mr James has plenty to say on the distinctions between design and decoration.

This hard-hitting criticism is just what we need. After all it is just as easy to make a pleasant article as an ugly one. Sometimes it is cheaper, too.

All manufacturers of popular commodities might well put a copy of this pamphlet under their pillows.—C.T.



WALTER BURLEY GRIFFIN — still a great name in Australian architecture.

suburban cottage; back to the high roof, the central passage, the little windows. They have reverted to the superannuated builders' designs. . . ."

In the work of the State Housing Commission Mr Boyd sees also a doleful decline. "The Architects' Panel can hardly relish such products as cement sheets made to look like weatherboards and aluminium cut and moulded to ape terracotta tiles."

"The situation is worsening. There are only two solutions. The architects must become the builders, or the builders must become architects. Only when sound design becomes automatic and inherent in the building operation will it be able to compete on the open market with the familiar bad design."

"While sound design is forced upon unwilling tradesmen it will remain an expensive luxury."

The highest tribute to the book is that one would like it to be longer—to tell us more about the bluestone warehouses and about such curious ventures as the Olderfleet and the Rialto.

However, what is noteworthy is that in such comparatively brief space Mr Boyd has been able to say so much and to say it in so stimulating a way.

Altogether a valuable contribution which concludes on a note of optimism:

"Victorian building, rid of the diseases and decay that racked its frames, though still not strong in 1947, is healthy. All it needs is fresh thought and exercise."