

UGLINESS IN THE SUNLIGHT

Robin Boyd's book *THE AUSTRALIAN UGLINESS* is as pitiless as the Australian sun, to which he makes frequent references.

And it has other characteristics of that sun, too—it shows up the last detail, it blisters and possibly it will be too severe for the unprepared.

No overseas critic, upbraiding us for our shortcomings, has hit harder and in more tender places than Boyd has done, but the soothing salve which follows his blistering is his obvious love for Australia and his sorrow that so many of the things should have been done as he sees them around him.

He spares nothing—public buildings, our homes, our clothes, our drinking habits, and least of all our euphemisms.

His heaviest fire is directed on what he regards as our besetting sin, "Featurism."

Let him define Featurism. It "stands for the subordination of the whole and the accentuation of selected separate features . . . but in the most common form the featured features are not required functionally by man or beast. They mean very little, and they do absolutely nothing."

These features may be "of such Gobbelian proportions that they convince the reader that they must be true, the pylons of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, or the tower of Melbourne's Manchester Unity Building."

For Canberra

Therefore he mourns for Canberra.

"If ever there was a city planned to be above Featurism, to be grandly whole and united, it was Canberra," he writes.

Boyd says, however, that the original Canberra plan of Walter Burley Griffin bogged down in Australian bureaucracy. The Griffin road problem struck trouble and the Griffin architectural system was never even considered seriously.

He says that to eyes not accustomed to the Chicago school of architecture and the idiom of Frank Lloyd Wright—Griffin's teacher—the stratified sweeps of shadowy terraces, sudden blank walls and romantic towers were merely hideous.

However, some of Griffin got through.

"Parliament House still stands as a clean white stucco building of surprising clarity and strength . . . because it was considered only temporary it was not pompous in scale and was not over-ornamented.

The Hotel Canberra "is also successfully watered-down Griffin."

However, this mood does not last long.

Boyd says: "A little later, in the shopping blocks at Civic Centre and housing estates nearby, the Griffin mould was dropped but another picked up—a sort of Colonial Mediterranean of stucco and arcades. Soon after this, all idea of unity was forgotten. Every new structure featured a new style."

"The last big building before the (National Capital Development) Commission took charge, the Government Administrative Block of 1957, was made in the tradition of permanent governmental buildings anywhere in the world, a solid austere monumentality which has found favour with Fascist, Communist and Australian bureaucracy."

About the same time, he says, "Featurism laid its sticky fingers on the remains of the early attempts at unity."

"The long arcaded facades of the shipping block at Civic began to break up into stripes of different colours as shopkeepers decided to feature their own arches."

None Escapes

Almost savagely, Boyd assails one of Canberra's prides—the official buildings designed for foreign or Commonwealth countries.

The American Embassy: Three separate scrubbed red and white retired Colonel's homesteads in a billowing expanse of lawn set with three or four kindly old eucalypts manfully doing their best to look deciduous.

The U.K. Commissioner's office block: Whitehall Export Modern, clearly made of stern stuff, capable of keeping a stiff upper lip in the Southern Hemisphere. Symmetrical, bleached and negative.

The U.K. High Commissioner's residence: Asymmetrical and suitably informal for the colonies.

The Swedish Legation: A Sulman Prize winner but a disappointing export from the home of mature modern architecture.

The South African building: Looking like an inaccurately drawn cardboard backdrop for the finale of a musical comedy about Cecil Rhodes.

Of the A.N.U. he says that "another attempt at a unified and comparatively non-

Featurist design started with high ideals and lost the way."

However, Boyd speaks hopefully of the work of the N.C.D. Commission and says that late—but perhaps not too late—Canberra has returned to the principle of planning.

None of the capitals and few of our institutions escape Boyd's mordant comment.

Sydney, which to the annoyance of Melbourne people—he calls the unconstituted capital of Australia, has the Australian ugliness "bigger and better" but also has the greatest beauty.

Melbourne: Anything other than avid Featurism could hardly have been expected, considering the circumstances of its childhood.

Other chapters deal with the unhappy truth of the Australian suburban dwellers' almost frantic desire to get rid of trees and to get everything that grows down to clipper level.

New building areas in which the sub-dividers left trees standing for each home soon were treeless at the desire of the new homebuilders.

The Australian obsession with American customs, dress, slang and living customs is down in "Anglophiles and Austerians."

"Surfers"

In this and other chapters, Queensland's Surfers' Paradise is limned faithfully and mercilessly—its meritricity, its ugliness swamping its beauties.

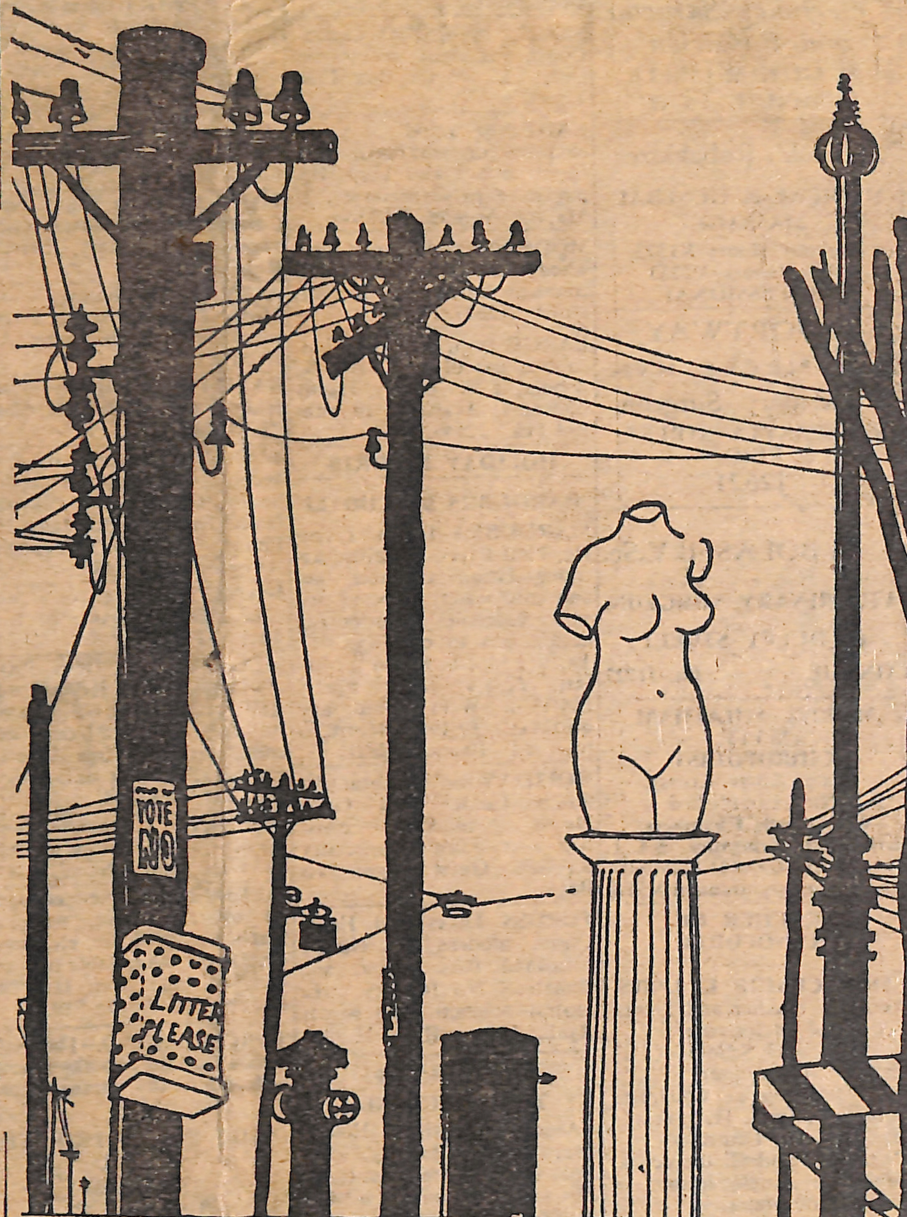
The all-male bars, the gaudy beer-gardens, the coy doors marked with a man's hat and stick and with a crinoline or powder-puff respectively to indicate their utilitarian backgrounds, come in for Boyd's biting scorn.

Introducing the book to Canberra this week, Professor A. D. Hope said that the book would annoy many people and would make other people think, both of which were good things.

Professor Hope's summing was a considerable understatement.—R.W.

THE AUSTRALIAN UGLINESS, Robin Boyd. F. W. Cheshire. 35/-.

THE GREAT AUSTRALIAN UGLINESS



The dust cover of Robin Boyd's new book, *The Australian Ugliness*, drawn by the author—who did all the illustrations for the book.