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THE SHAPEMAKERS: ARCHITECTS

One of a series of articles by CRAIG McGREGOR on people who are helping to shape the quality of life in Australia.

"ARCHITECTURE to me is a piece of sculpture. Look at the Opera House — whether it does or doesn't fulfil its purpose is irrelevant. The paramount thing about architecture is to create visual joy, to have this great sculpture come to life in sunlight."

HARRY SEIDLER, Architect.

"Buildings must work. That's what they're for. Architects today should be technologists, problem-solvers; the form of a building should grow out of what it has to do."

TOM HEATH, Architect.

And there, gentlemen, you have it. The disagreement could hardly be more profound, and it runs right through architecture today—which is partly why contemporary Australian architecture is so divisive, bitchy, competitive and creative. The Opera House affair, which appeared to split the profession in two, merely exacerbated the rift which already existed between those who thought architecture an art and those who thought it the mundane science of designing buildings that worked.

Yet both philosophies can produce good buildings, such as Seidler's Australia Square, whose tall cylinder dominates the downtown skyline, or McConnel, Smith and Johnson's Water Board building, which equally dominates the other end of the city. So can the intermediate philosophies of architects like Ian McKay ("I'm a common-sense architect—a good Buckminster Fuller term for you"), twice winner of the Sulman medal; Col Madigan, whose firm recently won the competition for the National Art Gallery in Canberra; and the agency Young and Johnson, N.S.W. Government Architect's office; Peter Hall, Mike Dysart, Ian Woolley, Peter Webber.

Answers

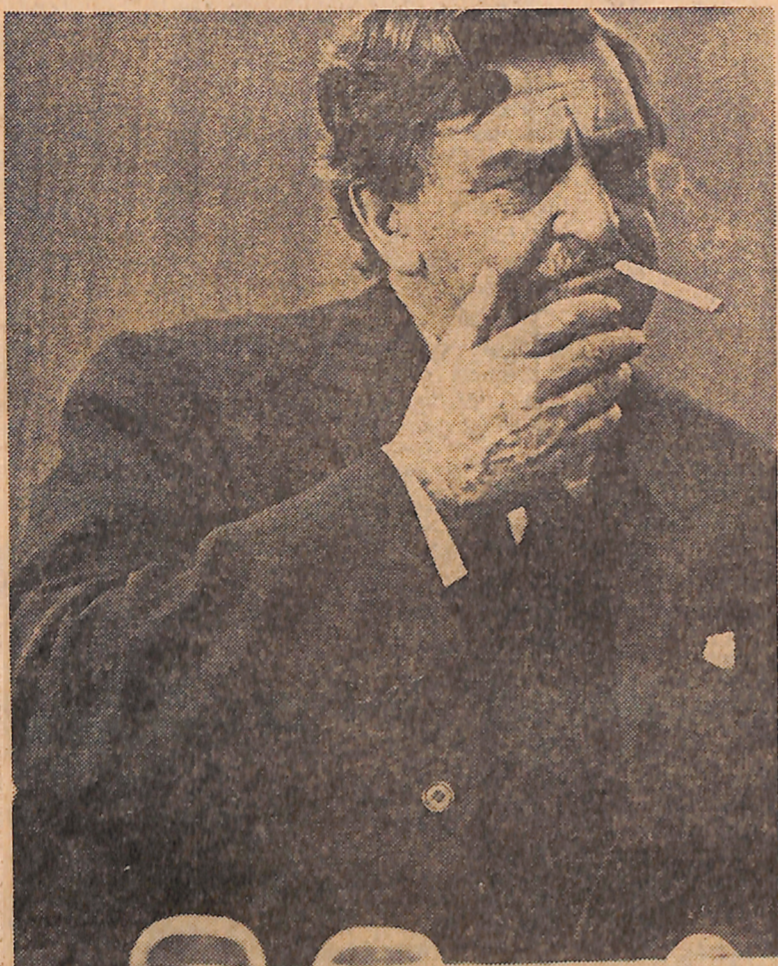
It is men like these who are designing the few important buildings which stand out from the morass of most local architecture, and who will have to shape the answers to the typical Australian problems of urban sprawl, aesthetic aridity and sheer faulty design. It only requires a short walk around the ugly cluster of new buildings in Sydney's business centre, or the shrieking eclecticism of 1960s Canberra, or the fibro scales which encircle our cities like ringworm, to see what a gigantic task they have.

But a start has been made — in fact began about three decades ago, in Melbourne. It was there that modern architecture first made a breach in Australian conservatism in the work of Roy Grounds, who began using flat roofs, bagged brickwork, native timbers and rough concrete in his houses in the 1930s; Robin Boyd, now the most influential architectural critic in the country; Peter McIntyre, one of the "new wave" of the 1950s whose Olympic Stadium made dramatic use of the new technology; the firm of Yuncken, Freeman, which designed the Myer Music Bowl; and a handful of others.

Grounds, of course, has just completed the most important commission of his life, the Victorian Arts Centre. A fierce, irascible, growly bear of a man with a military moustache and mien (he was a squadron leader in the war), he has been fighting the Philistines all his life and bears the scars in his face, a certain reflex idiosyncrasy. "It's going wonderfully; everybody is going to hate it," he says of a current project. He describes a cottage he built for £600 at Mount Eliza in 1934 as "the most significant this century." One of his favourite buildings is a house he built for himself and his wife at Frankston. "We were ostracised for building a straight-lined, stripped-down, cold, unemotional, horror. Eighteen months later I took an award as the best house built in Victoria for 25 years."

"I loved him"

When he was a young man Grounds studied overseas and became a friend of one of the fathers of modern architecture, Frank Lloyd Wright. "I loved the man," he says, his brusque manner dropped for a moment. "If anybody says he hasn't been influenced by Frank Lloyd Wright he is a bloody liar — he invented the carport. He was a very mighty, misunderstood Celt. So am I. I love people. I'm painting portraits with my buildings all the time. Take this Arts Centre, now. It's a portrait of Melbourne of the time." Typically, a little later: "This is a rich, smug city. Pretty conservative. I'm a renegade... And still later, a little defensively: "I've become almost a member of the Establishment. I find people say 'he's had it, because he's been accepted, therefore his work's no good.'"



GROUND'S: Form is the starting point.

DAVID BEAL



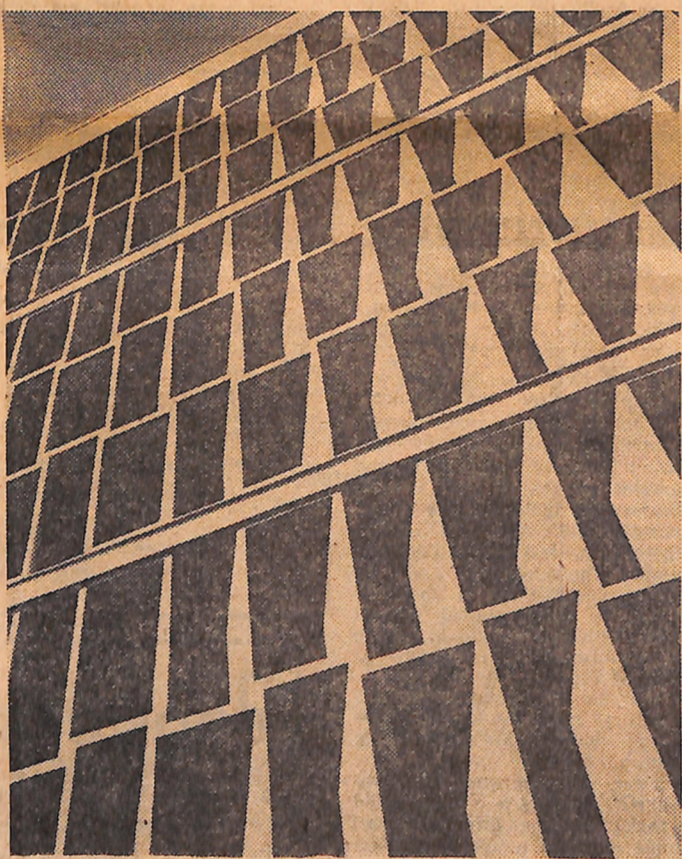
BOYD: Criticism from Melbourne.

DAVID BEAL

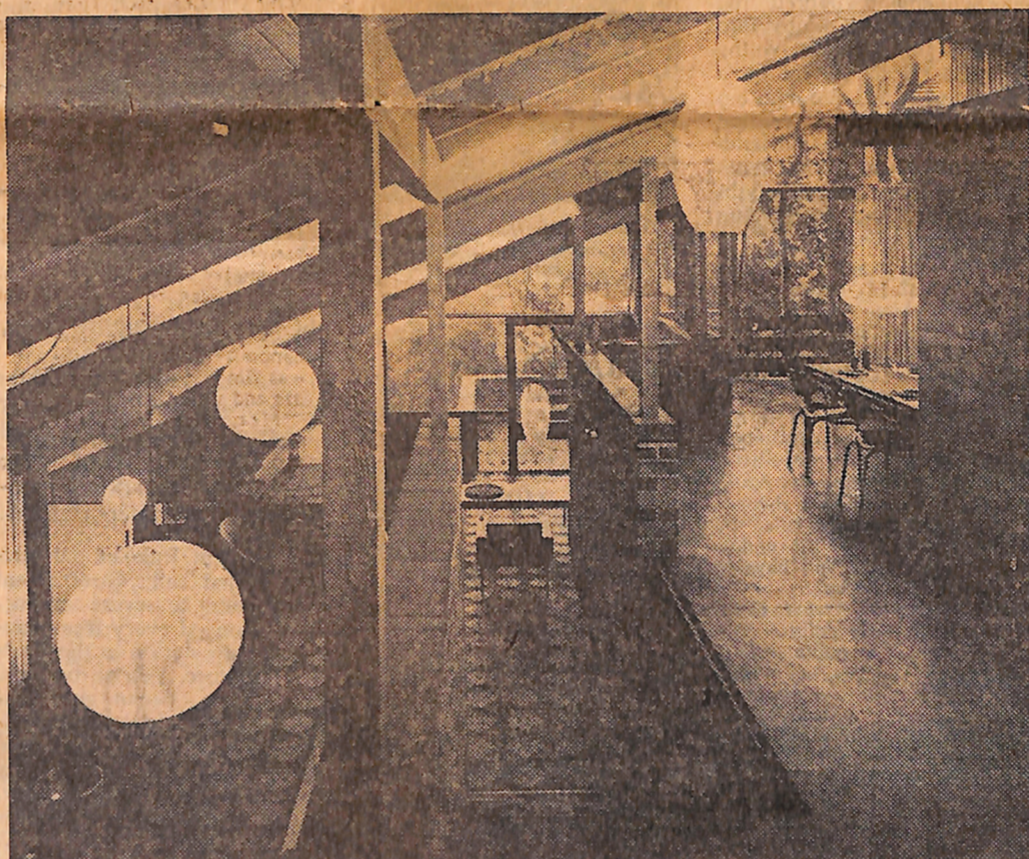


SEIDLER: The task — to produce environments.

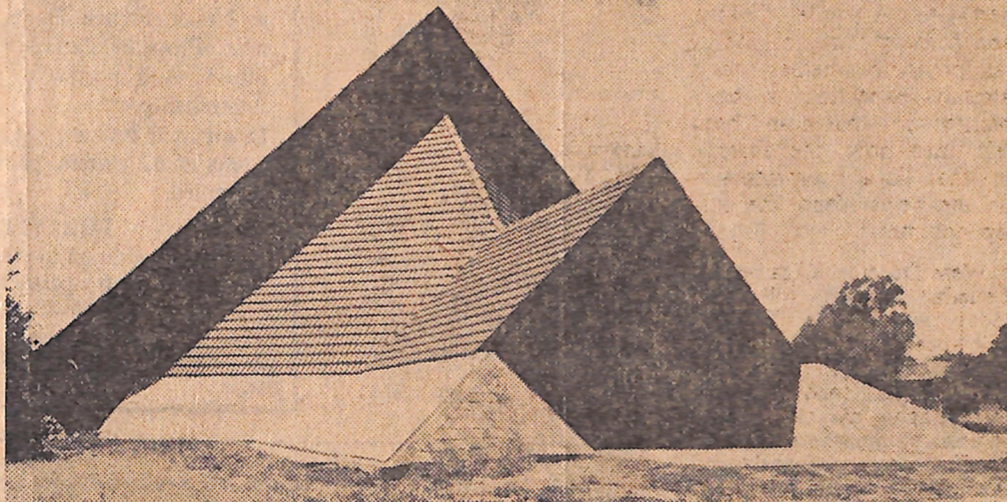
The men who draw tomorrow's world



SCULPTURE IN CONCRETE
 Printers' Union building — Seidler.



BUILDINGS TO BE ENJOYED
 Interior of Woolley's house.



FORMS FROM LANDSCAPE
 Church at Manilla—McKay.

practical, straightforward, and unique in its handling of materials. After the war he had a great influence on successive waves of graduates of Melbourne University's School of Architecture, where he was senior lecturer in design. In his later work, however, he has experimented more and more with arbitrary geometric forms, culminating in the spherical Academy of Science building at Canberra, and the rigorous squares of the Arts Centre.

Grounds, in other words, is a conceptual architect: he conceives of an abstract idea for a form, and then tries to make it work. The form of the Arts Centre came to him while he was relaxing on the beach at Waikiki. He scratched it in the sand with a stick, turned to his wife and said simply: "There's the Cultural Centre." And so it was to be.

Not many architects like the centre — but such is the in-grown-toenail-toughness of the profession that there hasn't been much criticism of it in public. Architecture these days is big business. (Graham Thorp, of Eddle, Thorp and Walker, who specialise in big commercial contracts, has one of the highest

Sydney now

earned incomes in the nation) and "sue the architect" has been a popular game ever since Harry Seidler slapped a writ on George Molnar, Associate Professor of Architecture at the University of N.S.W., and "Herald" cartoonist, because of an article Molnar wrote about him. Architecture lacks the regular, sustained criticism to which drama, literature and the traditional arts are subjected; serious discussion tends to be back-of-the-hand and correspondingly violent. "Disastrous—almost as bad as the proposed A.M.P. development in Sydney" is how one leading architect described Grounds' as yet unbuilt spire for the Arts Centre.

Melbourne impetus. Certainly "the Sydney school" is the dominant force today, and it is Sydney which has the one indisputably major architect working in Australia: Harry Seidler. Seidler doesn't belong to the Sydney school. He is older than the others, for a start. He is also an utter individualist. He has many admirers, few followers. At a time when architecture is becoming more and more a complex business undertaking handled by firms with several partners, each of whom helps to design the final structure, his firm remains "Harry Seidler and Associates."

Born in Vienna, Seidler was trained in the Bauhaus tradition under Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer and the painter Josef Albers, and came to Australia with a truly international style which has only slowly adapted itself to the local environment. The very first house he built, back in 1949, won the Sulman medal for architecture; in the years that followed he smashed his way through archaic building regulations, designed houses of forbidding angularity and simplicity, and forged a growing reputation overseas.

Since then he has begun to concentrate on large-scale projects: Blues Point Towers, Ithaca Gardens apartments, a block of split-level flats at Rushcutters Bay, Australia Square. At present he is working on the huge State Government Stores at Alexandria and a cluster of 100 courtyard units for the Australian National University in Canberra. Like almost everything about Seidler, it is a logical development. "I don't want to produce small masterpieces; I want to produce prototypes for wholesale development, so that we can design a total environment for people," he explains, pacing around his office on the seventh floor of the Lense House at Circular Quay (he designed it). "That's why I'm interested in flats. They're prototypes. So are these cluster houses at Canberra. They provide everything the ordinary Australian wants in a house, but they take up only one-third of the total space demanded by ordinary suburbia. That's our critical problem in Australia, the wastage of land. Architects have got to think in social terms; our calling is to produce environments."

Diverse

They are not a unified group. At one end of the spectrum are people like Ian McKay and the firm of Edwards, Madigan and Torzillo who believe that architecture is concerned with people, with creating the good life rather than evolving spectacular forms. McKay, for instance, believes the Opera House is one of the worst of all cul-de-sacs: "It doesn't perform properly, its cost is enormous, it's going to take 20 years, to build—as for those shells, they're completely irrelevant, sheer beautification."

A solid, tweedy, pipe-smoking man who could double for Inspector Maigret, McKay grew up in Coonabarabran and much of his work has been in the country; a sensuously beautiful agricultural college at Paterson, near Maitland, a home for delinquents near Liverpool, a civic centre in Cowra, a church at Manilla. He is deeply influenced by landforms and took the pitch of his Manilla church roof from the surrounding hills; and he acknowledges the Italian hill town overtones of his agricultural college.

But there are some surprises about McKay. He drives a battered MG "B," is involved in everything from the students' committee of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects to a blistering report on Aboriginal housing, and maintains the two strongest influences on him are Buckminster Fuller and Bob Dylan — "he's a major figure; his songs are extremely relevant to our time, yet they have this romantic, melodic quality." His ideas are changing rapidly and he has begun to make deliberate use of modern technology: a new canteen in Canberra will use three-dimensional plywood trusses 65 feet long — probably the longest in the world.

Little kicks

"I'm concerned with whether people enjoy using a building, like the look of it, get little kicks out of it," says Woolley. A tall, sallow-faced man of 35 with a domed head and long, bushy sideburns which make him look rather like the Evil Lawayer in a Victorian melodrama, his buildings confirm his interest in people: three student unions, a descending terrace of town houses at Darling Point, and those sophisticated, much-imitated designs for project builders Pettit and Sevit. He is concerned with "a rational way of finding things that look good," defends the Sydney school by bluntly stating: "I've never thought there was anything wrong with romanticism." His State Office Block is widely admired; some think it too

Cerebral

Their work is sometimes called "cerebral," and certainly they emphasise function rather than form; but that, argues M.S.J., is how it should be. In the Water Board building they circumvented the problems of the glass curtain wall (warped glass, expensive air-conditioning, lack of sun shading) with inexorable simplicity: no glass curtain wall.

Woolley is ambitious, thinks architects should compete with package dealers and project developers, and has already produced an experimental house built of plastic panels at Penrith. He has made a tremendous impact in a short time, and even those who respect him wonder whether he can sustain the pace. The next few years will be crucial.

Which of his contemporaries does he like? Woolley ponders, can't come up with only two names: Seidler, predictably enough, and McConnel, Smith and Johnson. M.S.J., as they are known, are the technologists of the Sydney scene; they approach architecture as a science, call in engineering consultants at the very start of a project, and carry the team concept to such a pitch that they never reveal who actually designed a building: "we all did." Over the years they have completed an increasingly important series of projects: the Stock Exchange, the War Veterans' home at Narrabeen, Randwick Tech, the Water Board building. Their latest is the Commonwealth-State law courts in Queen's Square.

It was the G.A. coterie, in fact, who helped synthesise the typical Sydney style. While they were all still there they put out a manifesto on "Natural Materialism" in which they declared their belief in natural materials like timber and brick, a deliberate policy of not disguising or finishing their materials ("we actually let the end grain of wood show: heresy," says Ken Woolley), and a direct, straightforward approach to design.

Other architects were thinking along the same lines, and a series of houses incorporated what were soon to become Sydney trademarks: clinker brick, stained off-the-saw timber, stripped concrete, simple massing forms. The G.A. architects applied the same approach to their public buildings. Peter Hall designed Goldstein Hall at the University of N.S.W. before moving on to the Opera House; Mike Dysart designed a standard "doughnut" plan for High schools as well as the new Institute of Technology in Broadway; Peter Webber designed the Psychology Building at New England University, and Ken Woolley was largely responsible for the Fisher Library at Sydney University and "the Black Stump" (State Office Block) before leaving to join Ancher, Mortlock and Murray.

Despite Robin Boyd, M.S.J.'s Tom Heath argues that what the Sydney architects have in common is not romanticism ("the Melbourne architecture of the 1950s really romanticised technology, using it even when it was inappropriate," he says) but rather this sort of empirical, problem-solving, untheoretical approach to everything from materials to overall design. "Their lack of formal preoccupations has led to an architecture which is informal, unexpected, even picturesque," he says. "And some of it is very good."

As usual, the other cities tend to lag behind Melbourne and Sydney. One of the important architectural developments of the sixties has been the building boom in Perth, which has produced some restrained but confident architecture: R. J. Ferguson's Law School at the Western Australian University, the Reid Library on the same campus, and the multi-storey Perth Council House. In Brisbane John Dalton has designed some interesting one-off homes.

But any discussion of architecture tends to come back to the same names: Grounds, with his eyes watery from too much glaring at the enemy; Seidler, with his hair parted carefully in the middle, neat bow tie and irresistible puritan conviction; McKay, mixing Assisi and Bob Dylan; the G.A. rebels, redesigning everything from project homes to Opera Houses; McConnel, Smith and Johnson, evolving a computer architecture for a computer age. They are as unlikely a group of shapemakers as you could wish to find, as eccentric as the half-hearted artiness of the dress they affect (do all architects wear bow ties and black shoes?). But what they draw today, we live, work and die in tomorrow.