

# THE UGLY AUSTRALIAN

**The Australian Ugliness.** Robin Boyd.  
F. W. Cheshire. 35s.

ONE "first" Australia can lay claim to, although she rarely does, is that of the world's ugliest man-made environment. Australia was settled, in the main, in impoverished architectural periods and by lower-middle class Anglo-Saxons and Celts, both people short on aesthetic sense; we have inherited little of value and less that is indigenous, and we have blithely combined it, in drab suburbs and the commercial jumbles we call cities, with modern architecture that often is no better than the old. Those who recognise how unhappy are the results usually cultivate a hardy indifference, but Robin Boyd, with the relish of Barry Humphries' Mrs. Everage listing the blessings of sandblasted reindeer doors and burgundy axminster carpets, describes the Australian ugliness in its most familiar aspects.

He does this without sadistic intent and not merely as a catalogue of our bad taste; he claims to have found the principle behind the ugliness and he sees this surface in its widest context as a reflection of the collective character of the Australians. This principle is Featurism, and he gives a definition as broad as the continent: "the subordination of the essential whole and the accentuation of selected separate features" and just as wide an application. Canberra and the Harbor Bridge are cited as prime examples of Featurism, the Bridge for its non-functional stone pylons which made the "ugly" steel more presentable, and the national capital for its footling departures from the wholeness of the original Griffin plan.

He tracks Featurism to its suburban lair: "The room's main feature is not really the feature wall in the yellow vertical v-jointed *Pinus insignis* boards, nor the featured fireplace faced with autumnal stone veneer, nor the vinyltiled floor in marbled grey with feature tiles of red and yellow let in at random, nor the lettuce-green Dunlopillo convertible day-bed set before the Queensland Maple television receiver, nor any of the housewifely features hung on the walls; nor the floor-stand ash-tray in chromium and antique-ivory, nor even the glass aquarium on the wrought-iron stand under the window." The real feature of the room is the tea-table, groaning with all kinds of good foods set in a plastic dream. The table top features hard laminated plastic in a pattern of pinks resembling the *Auroa Australis*. The table-mats are a lacework of soft plastic, the red roses in a central bowl are a softer plastic . . ." and so it goes on, detailed as a nightmare.

An anthropologist recently remarked that the white Australians are really little better understood than the blacks, and provide an almost virgin field for study. Certain tribal laws such as mateship and a respect for ancestors have produced such

a strong Australian stereotype that it is difficult to perceive latter-day developments. Here Boyd's brilliant essay on Austerica is of help. Austerica is "not a place but a way of life . . . it is found in any country . . . where an austerity version of the American dream overtakes the indigenous culture."

Boyd identifies Surfer's Paradise as the capital of Austerica which spreads its influence through comics, films, radio, teenage dance spots, which fills the vacuums in every vacant corner of the Australian mind and finds its most wretched occasion when, on TV, Australians mouth words and mimic actions for American songs sung by Americans. Although Austerica is coextensive with Australia, it is only a province—and the most depressing aspect of it is its acceptance of the second-hand and second-best. This splendid sociological essay links with Boyd's caustic comments on Australia's under-payment of creative thinkers and his observation that plagiarism is the most widely practised art in Australia, but it is better-known and less central than his account of the sins of Featurism committed by those with the best visual intentions.

The pattern of settling in the bush near the bigger cities is familiar: the artistic non-conformists are followed by the bourgeois Bill's who convert it into the image of the suburb they are escaping, but Boyd points out there is an intermediate period when sensitive, sophisticated people arrive, commission architects to design attractive, original houses and thereby spoil the scene even before the subdividers pounce. The stages of despoilment can be observed as, accompanied by the mystic sound boom, boom, boom, the rash of suburbia spreads from Sydney to Scotland Island and, if we are to believe the foreshortened advertising maps of the land speculators, approaches Nowra. To attribute the unappealing result of that middle phase to something as vague as lack of taste would be superficial: "none is to blame individually, while all are to blame col-

lectively. It is not a lack of imagination or sensitivity or originality which causes the spoliation, but an overabundance of these qualities without the co-ordinating discipline of traditional craft technique and, more important of course, without a common artistic aim."

Boyd is more optimistic about the possibility of a non-Featurist Australia than he might be in face of the evidence he presents. Non-featurism, or anti-featurism, is the subject of the last third of the book which answers the question what constitutes good architecture with "the form's faithfulness to its motive or idea." Non-featurism could correct the Australian ugliness provided we recognise "that there is an appropriate time and place for both the technology of space enclosure and the architecture of expression, and to work to eliminate the neuter type: neither scientific nor artistic." The Sydney Opera House and Unilever House each achieve their purpose. A brave visionary, he even foresees suburbs such as those he claims exist in Scandinavia: a planned community with an easy acceptance of nature, mutual respect and a common artistic aim.

In my book suburbia, which lacks the qualities of both city and country life, always spells conformity and isolation. The way to combat its disadvantages is to restore the idea of a city by reclaiming inner areas and achieving density of population, with consequent improvements in services, through attractive apartments which could avoid the riot of indiscipline and ugliness inseparable from the doctrine of each man on his own cabbage patch. Still I suppose such a change will never come about: not only are people complacent about their little kingdoms, they are fiercely attached to myths of independence, of the health of their children being dependent on a scrubby backyard, of the necessity for contact with nature. So I hope Robin Boyd's vision of Scandinavian-type communities is realised. But while waiting for them, read this book: it will make you see what you have been looking at these past few years.

DESMOND O'GRADY