

From

"SUNDAY AUSTRALIAN"

110 OCT 1971

Australia

Monument builders sit in a humble back seat

ARCHITECTURE

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YOU MUST remember a huge, heavy-breathing novel of the post-war years called *The Fountainhead*, by Ayn Rand. It was a best-seller and is still doing the rounds as a paperback, for it is a sort of classic: the first novel ever written about architecture — and probably the last, for reasons I shall explain in a moment.

Its hero was Howard Roark, a godlike figure, tall, lean, tense, taciturn; a rock of integrity with creative powers barely surpassed by God's. He was the embodiment of imaginative architecture, and when Hollywood made the movie of the book, who else but Gary Cooper could have been cast in the role?

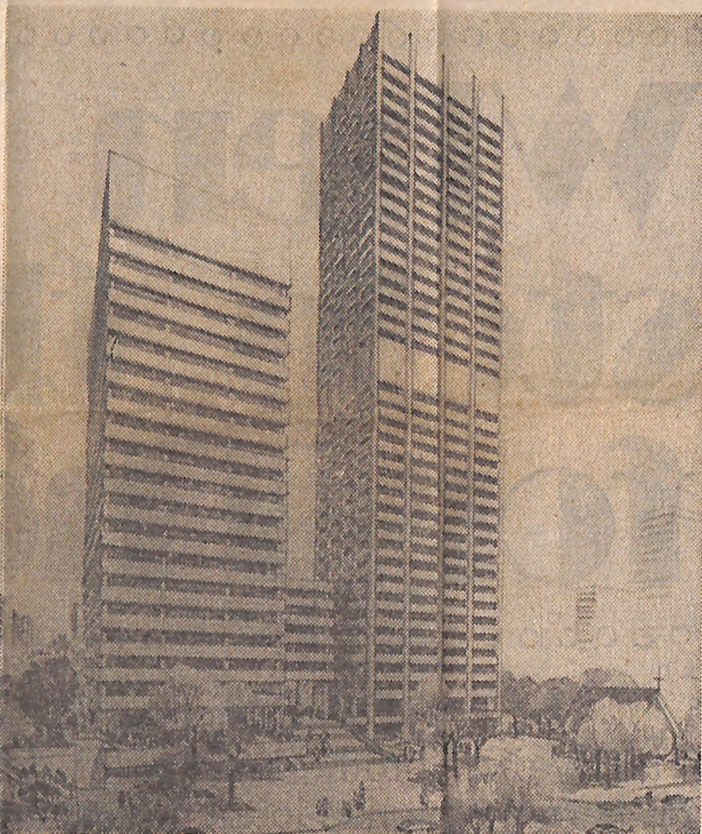
The story was thickly populated with other types of architect. There was Peter Keating, who started with advantages and luck, and shot to the top to be the star architect of New York. But only briefly. A weakling and a charlatan, he soon grew fat and clients deserted him. Then there was Gordon L. Prescott, commercialiser of the art, a turtle-necked sweater wearer. And there was a bizarre party when all the architects came, each dressed as his own best building.

All except Roark, who was too busy working on commissions which were fairly modest in size but infinite in potential. One typical client briefed him thus: "What I want in this building is spirit. Your spirit, Mr Roark. Give me the best of that and you will have done your job. Let it be your spirit in the shape of a building."

Ornaments

Howard Roark found time between these free flights to devise a low-cost housing apartment system which would permit an economic rent of \$10 per month per flat — which wasn't too bad even in 1947. When one of these blocks was built, but was ruined by others who added Renaissance ornament, Roark provided the melodramatic climax of the book: he crept out one night and blew up the building. However he successfully defended himself in court, on the grounds that the building's integrity had already been destroyed, and at story's end he was gainfully employed in designing and helping to construct the biggest and tallest building in all the world.

At the time, architect readers enjoyed the game of associating Ayn Rand's strongly typed characters with architects in their own towns, having little difficulty in casting every part from the local pool. And even after all the intervening years some of the names of the main characters and buildings are still sometimes



A section of the proposed William Street, Sydney, redevelopment.

applied, in conversation between architects, to real people and buildings. For Miss Rand bent few nails in building her story, and hit many squarely on the head.

Yet the references are only a half-nostalgic in-joke among architects. In just two decades since *The Fountainhead* was at its peak of success the whole world of architecture has changed. The profession which that book depicted as the finest of arts, the practice of which reached its highest pinnacle with the injunction from a millionaire client: "forget the cost, build a monument," that profession is, at the moment, as dead as poor old Gary Cooper.

All emphasis has turned from the individual building to the framework of roads and pedestrian ways and miniparks and public transport and carparking facilities into which the building must fit. The swing is most evident in recent proposals of some magnitude — the William Street scheme in Sydney and the St Kilda foreshore development scheme in Melbourne. In both, a well-considered plan of all those public amenities and facilities is the official contribution to the development — and is, in fact, the whole of the scheme.

Private enterprise is then invited to fill in the blank spaces with buildings. These buildings are more or less free to take any form, style or color they wish, since no one is interested in them. The things that now take the attention of the avant-garde as well as the conservative are the nodes of activity along the pedestrian malls in the urban planner's diagram.

In the case of the William Street scheme it was made clear that the buildings would be private and independent. In the case of the St Kilda scheme it was not. But it was explained that about 60 acres would be developed at a cost of \$12 million, \$2 million of which might go in soil surveys.

It does not take an ace economist to calculate that the development will thus cost only \$167,000 an acre, which cannot allow for any building by the time one has recovered land from the bay and built the promised roads and pier and air-cushioncraft terminal and monorail and all the other extra attractions without which no development scheme would dare expose itself these days.

Romantic 50s

So architecture is given a back seat, and accepts it humbly, due to a guilt complex that it has been cultivating masochistically over the last decade.

However, it is only a back seat in the moral sense. In fact the fill-in architecture is going to loom large, dominating the pedestrian precincts of the urban plans just as powerfully and physically as the individual dreams and disasters of Howard Roark's day.

And what we have seen so far of the prospects in these latest schemes holds out no encouragement to expect a change from the back-seat approach. Architecture has let itself down by over-compensating for its self-indulgence in the romantic 1950s. Which is why there will be no more novels about it, at least until it changes again.