

# I LOVE MELBOURNE

By Robin Boyd

The first of three articles in which an architect examines his city.

SOMETIMES in summer the sun rises like a porthole into Hell and a furnace wind from the north rips branches from silver birches cringing inside their precariously perched municipal planting pots. On such mornings I think about renewing my subscription to the Royal Give-It-Back - to - the - Dugallan - Tribe Society.

Yet, later in the day, just as you start to believe you can breathe no longer in the starved and fabled air, suddenly a cry goes up: "She's turned around!" and through the swirling clouds in the sky you see the Union Jack on Government House and the Christmas or May Day tinsel hanging on the tram wires tying themselves in knots, reversing direction, straining now from a wind straight off the South Pole.

And sometimes Melbourne is the most benign city on earth, as on an autumn evening when, viewing from the right direction, the centre appears as nothing but spires and towers united in a golden glow rising from a rich greenest of parkland. You ask me what I think of Melbourne and immediately I think of contrasts, of her two faces, her schizophrenia - of sprawling tracts of man-made Australia interspersed with streets more elegant and civilised than you can find within a radius of 8000 metres.

Nature was in a businesslike mood when she heaped her blessings on the site of Melbourne. She provided the necessities: a fine safe bay, just enough fresh water, reasonably good soil, and she was not concerned with aesthetic matters.

There was subtle beauty in the bay-side and the valleys, but nothing to compare with the sites Sydney, Perth or Hobart. It was even less exciting than the landscapes of Adelaide and Brisbane. There was nothing to stimulate, let alone inspire citizens, nothing to give the city that grew here a natural strength of character.

Yet, as if to compensate, Nature also gave Melbourne its standing joke, its manic-depressive weather. And that gives the natural character to the place. The weather provides all the contrasts and stimulation one could ask for, and more than any other single quality gives the entirely artificial creation that is Melbourne the character it has today.

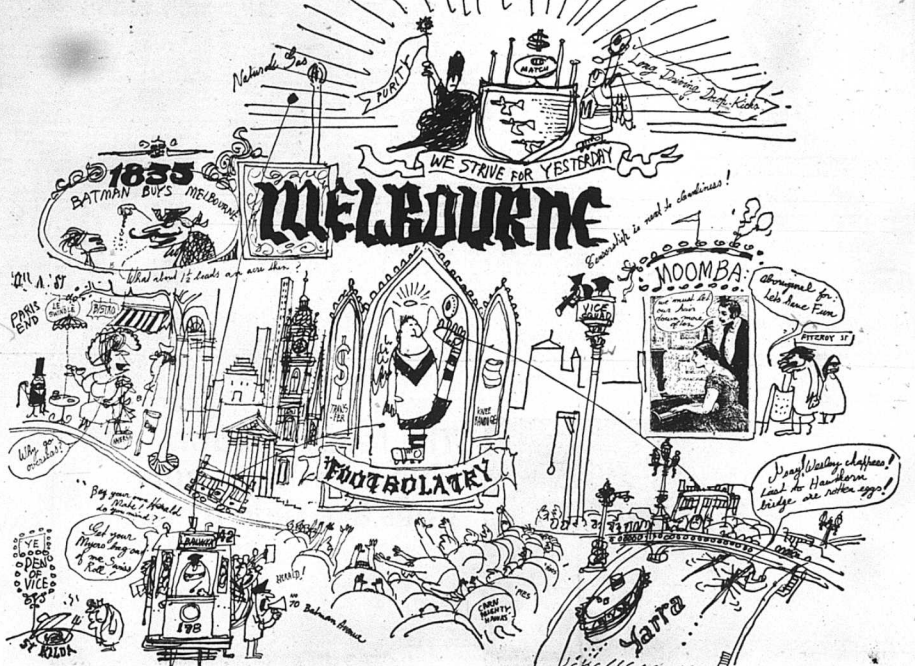
If anyone should think that is going too far, let him find some more convincing explanation for the extraordinary contrasts that make up Melbourne, the spirit that blows as hot and cold alternately as the wild winds that come down off Swanston Street.

There was never anything simple about Melbourne's character. From the start it was a mass of contrasts and complexes. You can see architectural evidence of this in the earliest buildings, which are still her most characteristic creations, and made in their time one of the few distinctive architectural styles ever invented in Australia.

These old buildings contrasted the massive strength of rock-faced bluestone, too hard to be cut straight, and the delicacy of wooden fretwork on cast-iron icing. Melbourne's buildings of today still offer contrasts enough, but of a different kind - mainly between the few educated ones and the many crassly ignorant.

Melbourne's pride is Collins Street, and it is - at the top end, at any rate - the most civilised of urban streets in this country. I am tempted to go so far further than that and say in the Commonwealth of Nations, though perhaps Collins Street at one of its nicest parts, a less busy urban street, called Russell, which would be hard to match anywhere in the world for tawdry, unloved dreariness - unless one thought of matching it to Exhibition Street.

Yet, to be fair, it should be said that these terrible twin streets are educating themselves, if painfully



Melbourne . . . as Pettys sees it in his book, Australia Fair.

slowly. Not long ago, most of the north-south streets were equally sordid, but slowly Swanston and Elizabeth, the two main approaches (depending on whether you are coming from north or south), are growing up. Such streets, anyway, are not unique in Australia or in the world. Every city has some of the same kind: all purpose streets of fluorescent milkbars and discount houses and little tailors. They are pleasantly scruffy when mixed with theatres and restaurants, but lonely and sad when left to their own resources.

Melbourne has Alexandra Avenue, which is just as old as this century, sweeping past the magnificent Botanic Gardens by the river, the leaves of its trees touching overhead. Or nearby, it is as gracious an avenue as you could find anywhere - this time I'll say it - in the world. And Melbourne also has, within a stone's throw of Alexandra Avenue, rows of gnarled posts which turn out on closer inspection to be the deformed trunks of some trees, which still try once a year to shoot upwards, but should know better for they will never be allowed to reach those wires.

That's not to mention the tens of thousands of acres of certain suburbs so bare that one must suspect the inhabitants of harboring a neurotic fear of any plan that cannot be spotted. Yet every Australian city has suburbs like that, and suburbs are not the subject set to me. The subject is why I love Melbourne, which must mean the central city and its immediate environment. Suburbs are much the same the world over, even if in Melbourne they are more so.

Melbourne gives every indication to a newcomer of being as square as the

gridiron plan of its streets. No one could blame a visitor for judging from the usual official attitude towards anything remotely progressive that the city has mind like a buttoned-up rain coat. It will be, without question, the last capital city in Australia to change the rules on censorship, capital punishment, and ceremonies performed in uniform.

Melbourne is still Australia's financial centre, but its money tends to be frozen. It is not the business enterprise centre, which, of course, is Sydney.

Melbourne has skyscrapers, but cautious ones. The height limit being apparently determined by how far Sydney went five years earlier. In other ways, Melbourne frequently gives the impression that it is not the most swinging city in the world. It tends on more occasions to run more cravenly and involuntarily for the help of the overseas expert. Three of the biggest skyscrapers, which are, or are about to be, built on the four corners of the hilltop intersection of Bourke and William Streets, involve American architects. The splendid towers that make up Sydney's spectacular new skyline are, more fittingly, all its own work.

Melbourne city was zoned by beautiful parklands last century. The view of it over the tops of those parks from the inner ring of suburbs is similar and somewhat superior to that from the upper floors of the apartments lining Central Park, New York. Yet only one tall block has been built in Melbourne to take advantage of this view, and it was the enterprise of a company from Sydney; Lend-Lease.

Among all the great heirlooms that

the city fathers of the 19th century left to modern Melbourne, there was one fairly disastrous error. They put a great expanse of railway yards between the city and its river. Melbourne has talked for most of this century about building over those yards. At last a start has been made. "Prince's Gate" is an enterprise consisting of two tall, thin, metal slabs built over the edge of the yards. It is, again, largely the work of the same company from Sydney.

The most famous and obvious symbol of Melbourne's conventionalism is the screeching, ludicrous tram. A visitor from London recently said to me: "I had heard about Melbourne's trams, but I'd forgotten about them. Then I left the airport at Essendon and almost immediately saw two of them. It was wonderful like seeing waterbuffalo when you land at Delhi. They are rather delightful."

Indeed, as a tourist attraction, they are. Their aesthetic qualities are aural and visual: steel, chrome, filled into octagons in the workshops every night to ensure the proper sound effects next day, and a color scheme of rich cream and green which was all the rage in 1927 when the first of the electric trams came to Melbourne.

The tangle of overhead wires, which they demand to feed them is not consciously seen by any Melbourne resident, but in fact changes the architectural face of most of the city, just as much as the presence of glass- and chrome-clad buildings which actually being noticed.

Indeed, as you cannot rely on Melbourne's conventionalism, The Melbourne rule of contrast always operates, always supplying some sort of balance. For every straining, stuffed shirt, there are the easy-going, open-necked and roll-up sleeves; for every conservative, traditional Georgian mansion in Toorak, there are at least five yellow-brick bachelors of speculative design, stripped down to minimal standards of design and dimension and equipment.

Yet these are architectural strait sleeves. They are not ill-fitting, assuasive, or Georgian in style. The American versions of the Las Vegas dream, Melbourne is a conventionalism rather than an unilluminated and unilluminable complexness.

There are numerous other examples of these are architectural conventionalism - the silent Sundays, the early nights, but I will not say they are necessary because it is not hard to convince any visitor from another State or overseas that Melbourne is a quiet, withdrawn city. Most Melbourne's own politicians agree.

You might even, on the above evidence, call it provincial, but then you would be in trouble with any Melbourne. For that is getting to the heart of the matter.

Hobart or Ballarat or any of a score of smaller towns. It is more realistic, it is more likely to be in a place where there are enough minds rubbing up against each other to sort out a few sparks.

It seems to be necessary to build up a pressure from two or three million people to eject one or two such sparks. To your question really resolves itself into: "Why don't you live in Sydney?"

If one happened to love Sydney, I think it would be a lot easier to say why. Sydney has a heart, spectacularly beautiful and seductive, and it can be read like an open book, or an open adventure comic. It is undeniably the focal point of Australia, and with our tiny population we have no business to try to maintain two focal points. Yet, thank God, that we have, and that Melbourne will never voluntarily surrender its share of a second centre, equal but different.

When Australia produces her share of creative civilisation, it will be in spite of the man we are still inclined to think of as the typical Australian.

George Mikes recently wrote about Australia in a generally laudatory book called Australian Boomerang. Mikes got numerous small unimpressive things about us very wrong and many big important things very right. One of the latter was his description of the "billionaire, intimidating" young men of Australia.

One of the few specimens of glass- and chrome-clad buildings which Aussie look which you see on thousands of faces all over the country, he wrote. There are many uneducated people in Australia, many uncut diamonds, and they are pathetically unsure of themselves. They are almost text-book cases of old-fashioned Freudian psychology."

A little thing which George Mikes did not seem to understand was that we are still ready to be proud of that. One of the few specimens of glass- and chrome-clad buildings which Aussie, about two yards high, with a hat on, in a current poster. He is saying: "Sure I'm Australian."

An index to Australian progress is the speed with which that old adage - now an advertising prop - is being submerged in the community by the other kind of Australian, somewhat better educated, more sure of himself, and his high standards of living are not arrogant, therefore potentially more creative.

To me, there has been for a long time a great air of humility about Melbourne. It is not the idea which arrogance about Sydney. I think that the early nights, but I will not say they are necessary because it is not hard to convince any visitor from another State or overseas that Melbourne is a quiet, withdrawn city. Most Melbourne's own politicians agree.

Before you jump down my throat thinking that outrageous, remember just think it over: apply the proposition to painting, creative science, medicine, theatre, architecture, even film, but remember that the operative word was origins.

Sydney has taken up most of the movements and, characteristically, has pushed them a little further than Melbourne did. Nevertheless, the origins are most important to Australia. The place which produces the most important ideas is the moral capital of Australia.

The rivalry between Sydney and Melbourne is not the idea which arrogance about Sydney. I think that the early nights, but I will not say they are necessary because it is not hard to convince any visitor from another State or overseas that Melbourne is a quiet, withdrawn city. Most Melbourne's own politicians agree.

## petty's comment



Petty