



Town planning... as Petty sees it.

A new Melbourne with the professional touch

CAN Australia do without architects and city planners? Many believe so.

Last of three articles by Robin Boyd, architect and Melburnian, in which he examines the faults and virtues of his city.



Every profession has its critics. Solicitors are crooked, surgeons sew you up with the forceps left inside, barristers are school bullies grown up; and so on. Yet they all have their uses and at times, indeed, appear to be indispensable.

Architects and planners also have their share of critics, but abuse does not greatly disturb them. Their chief trouble is that, alone among the so-called learned professions, they are not really wanted. They are considered thoroughly dispensable.

The little man has always been able to build his house without calling on the services of an architect. A builder and a scribble on the back of the dentist's bill was enough. Nowadays, the big man can build his skyscraper with the same freedom from professional entanglement. He simply calls for one of the dynamic new breed of organisations called Package Dealers. These employ lame architects drawing away energetically somewhere in a back room, but the man who is paying the money does not have to meet them.

University schools of architecture and town planning throughout Australia turn out hundreds of graduates each year after a five or six-year course designed to fit them for the task — not, as is sometimes thought, of designing pretty houses, but the task of moulding the Australian environment. Institutes of Technology produce many more.

About three of the young men and women in every hundred eventually, after many years, become a private practitioner or the boss of some architectural or planning department — in short, get the chance to influence some small section of the environment by designing a prominent building or influencing the course of a freeway.

Such impartial professional guidance is rare. With the qualified exception of the central city areas, where architects are still in charge of most big buildings — though by no means all — the environment in which most of us live is shaped by Developers, Transport Authorities, and countless counteracting pressures from the kings of commerce and industry.

That is not to say that all these people have had influence on our environment, for that the trained professionals are of one mind about what should be done. I made the point just to emphasise that the biggest and, ultimately, the most important thing we make, our environment, is largely an amateur concern.

Unlike our trade and commerce, our science, our art, our entertainment, our newspapers — unlike every other aspect of our life except some sport — it is not run by trained and experienced professionals but by astute amateurs with no training or pretence to a vision broader than their confines of the piece of land which they are at the moment exploiting.

That is what makes forecasting the future of any Australian city except Canberra impossible. Canberra, of course, is the exception, and gives a beautiful, small-scale hint at the possibilities for any other Australian city.

This situation is by no means uniquely Australian. English architects are in a reserved state of despair about what is happening to London, and to the once-lovely English countryside. However, younger and more personally affluent societies are in a worse state.

In the USA, they have been discussing the problem for years and have attacked it physically many times with a vigor that leaves Australian tourists gasping. Yet still the American urban environment is a "chaos." That is the word used by Archibald Rogers, an American architect, speaking last month. "There is," he said, "something radically wrong" and it goes "far beyond the question of aesthetics."

The radically wrong thing in Australia is a costly pinpoint. It is a wet blanket of public

apathy over the whole of the man-made mess. Very few people are aware of the environment outside their own house and their own car, and no calamitous slum-born riots or total traffic blockages have yet forced attention to be turned to the view outside the window.

Since there is so little public interest, there is practically no political activity; and in the long run the environment must be a political matter. It is true that Mr Richard Hamer, Victoria's Minister for Local Government, has frequently spoken of the need to plan the growth of Melbourne, with as much fervor as any professional planner; and Mr Whitlam has carried the subject into the Federal arena. A good start, but we are still far from the day of a bold governmental attack on the urban environment at any level — municipal, State or Federal.

Let us, however, suppose that such an attack — if possible, and whole partys of enlightened politicians were looking for professionals to guide them. What solutions would the architects and planners offer? Whether for better or worse, they could not speak with a single voice.

There are two quite different, quite widely accepted and respectable professional views on how any modern Australian city should develop. One view accepts that the average Australian has already made a choice as to the way he wants to live. It is not in the country and it is not in the city, but in a half-world called, for want of a better name, a suburb.

He wants a place to keep his cars and to get to work happy to leave the city at 5.30 or so and to let it die until after breakfast. He sees the good life in terms of various suburban activities easily reached by his car, and ever more, perhaps, like eating, labor-saving and entertaining.

He sees no objection to an endless sprawl of low-density development, provided he can get his car through it. He advocates, in short, an anti-city.

The other view is that the city itself, the concentrated centre of a precious thing without which there would have been no civilisation. High human density means a much greater variety of activities, a much wider range of entertainments. It allows non-conformity, like seeing in the strictest society, whereas the nicest suburb tends to demand uniformity of tastes and activities.

Density allows people of esoteric interests to group together, which is the only way breakouts from convention are possible and thus the only way real social progress can occur. Density — meaning a vital city — makes possible many arts and the encouragement of tender ideas that can only live on a turnover of people, arts that would certainly die in the manicured wastes of the richest anti-city.

A good city and a good anti-city both require planning to make them work, but a good city is more, and it is therefore less likely to happen in Australia.

But let us suppose that the temper of Australian life changes perceptibly as we grow up during the next 32 years, so that a desire for a more sophisticated and civilised life becomes general enough to make a political demand for positive cities? It is, of course, direct control of city development — something comparable to the Canberra discipline applied to the iron capital.

What is the best we could imagine for old Melbourne, assuming or making moment that our most brilliant planners and architects might be given their heads? Something, perhaps, like this: The suburban sprawl would be stopped, growth being channelled into fingers which bend to avoid the prettier parts

of bush and riverside. The fingers would be tied to the city by wide, park-lined freeways and rapid public transport.

A wide ring road would circle the city centre, carrying through traffic past, and unloading streams of private cars into surprisingly handsome parking stations.

The Flinders Street railway yards would be overbuilt by a huge, perforated structure, looking something like a stack of ceramic cheese graters, which would be in fact a sort of population of about 50,000 and self-contained to a great extent. At its base would be a vast traffic and transport terminal for every kind of vehicle, from which suburban freeways would fan out, running over the top of railway lines. Another couple of similar enormous structures might be seen building on the north of the city beyond the circle of skyscraper flats.



The central city would be strangely unfamiliar to any one of us, for the valley of Swanston Street would be gone — levelled out by a multi-storey roadway system. Trams would be where they should be, decently buried at the bottom level. Service vehicles would travel and unload their goods on the next level, taxis and mini-buses on the next. Pedestrians would roam or pant anywhere on the landscaped open deck at the top level, where the shop windows would at last be found.

The scale of the whole place would be unfamiliarly big. Those little splinters of buildings, six or seven storeys high and barely 20 feet wide, which make up most of Melbourne today, would be rare. The National Trust would be fighting to preserve the last

few. New buildings would be not only hundreds of feet higher than today's, but a hundred or more feet wider than usual, having consolidated numerous splinters of land into one holding.

Finally, the top end of Bourke Street would be the centre of a separate sort of night city, for people would actually live again in the city of Melbourne.

Four points should be made about that picture of future Melbourne. The first is that planners who advocate anti-city will hate the sound of it. Nevertheless, it represents very roughly a consensus of the remainder.

The second is that there is nothing new in any of it. All the elements I mention have been seriously proposed more than once, and several are, in fact, on the Government's books, but apparently stuck there indefinitely for want of money — which means, in this context, want of public demand.

The third point is that, apart from public spending, such spectacular changes suggest the imposition of fairly brutal, unpopular socialist restrictions on private enterprise. But this is not necessarily so. For instance, a painless start on the multi-level streets could be made now simply by prescribing standard levels for the lower floors of new buildings fronting the main city streets.

Incentives can do a lot. For instance, the consolidation of splinter properties can be encouraged by allowing a building on a bigger block to have a bigger floor area than the sum of buildings permissible on splinter blocks; and open space in the city can be encouraged by giving an owner who leaves open ground space a bonus by permitting extra skyscraping height.

The fourth point to be made is that, since all these ideas are so old, let us hope that those young architects and planners of 2001, given their head, will produce something much more bold and imaginative, and unimaginable within the limitations of our present technology.

petty's comment

