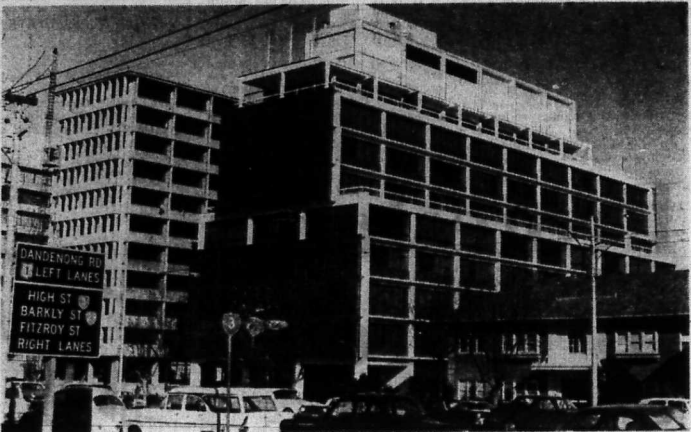


Spoilers of our environment: Part 1

Modern buildings in St. Kilda Road, which provide a "tragic example" of the growth of our cities "without a touch of the unity, dignity and grace which marked all previous periods of construction.

"... The gaudy strip of petty new comic carnival buildings contrasts so sadly with the broad vision of the 19th-century planners who created the great road they are destroying."



Legal vandalism

SUDDENLY everybody is talking environment. We have taken the lead — as usual — from the USA.

It all began with President Kennedy in 1961, but President Johnson and President Nixon also have found time between military preoccupations to comment on it, unfavorably.

So now it is quite politically safe and socially acceptable to be critical of the environment, and that gives the architect some satisfaction.

Our Australian visual environment is much the same as that of most developed Western countries — developed, that is, in building the most economical structures without any regard to urban design and, in the course of doing this, to trample over anything that happens to be in the way, natural or historic.

Thanks to all the books and magazine and newspaper articles on radio and television programmes on the subject during the past nine or 10 years since the subject became respectable, I don't think that it is necessary for me now to specify all the destructiveness, the cheap and nasty building, the great dull, ignorant, monotonous ugliness of the environment of today.

Main blights

But perhaps I should briefly catalogue the four main kinds of blight, as a reminder:

● At the lowest level there is the pure Gothic vandalism of the anachronistic touches, the high proportion of broken public-service facilities, ripped-out public telephones, unspeakable public lavatories, bashed-up picnic pavilions, &c.

Australia has more of these things than most other countries, for they are part of our great heritage from the First Fleet and Ned Kelly. Our fine irrepressible Digger spirit involuntarily expressing its disrespect for authority by such masculine activities as smashing stubby beer bottles and discarding one's lunch scraps on the public highway.

● At a slightly higher level we have the equally deliberate but more functional vandalism practised by people who misuse the environment to their own ends and can afford to disregard any offence they might give to some sections of the community.

In this class are some public-service authorities who run a bulldozer over all trees in sight as a preliminary ritual to any new project, just in case some tree might be in the way; and the nasty little free-space advertisers who stick their slogans and posters announcing musical or political happenings over the trunks of any trees left and on every available bridge wall and fence of the inner suburbs.

● The third kind of ugliness — or visual environmental pollution, to be more fashionable — is the most common kind.

It is the kind trailed by modern industrialised development all over the world; involuntary and uncaring; posts, wires, cheap buildings, hoardings, sub-stations and all the other paraphernalia

Architect, author, interior designer for Australia's pavilion at Expo '70, **ROBIN BOYD** is a relentless critic of "the Great Australian Ugliness". Today we begin a two-part condensation of his lecture to a seminar on environment conducted this week by the Institute of Business Administration and the Victorian Employers' Federation.

of technology shoved up wherever convenient and with no thought for the effect of one item on another or of the effect of all of them on the total environment.

This category is the product of greed and ignorance. Technology need not produce such ugliness, but without care it always will.

● The fourth element of our abused environment is the highest and saddest. It is high because it is the result of fairly good intentions and sad because the good intentions have gone wrong.

We see small examples of this in schemes described as "beautification" which consist of a few rocks and annuals stuck into the median strip of a suburban shopping district, or in park benches and planting boxes painted in colors more vivid than any to be found in the flower beds.

And we see big examples in some very big buildings veneered with bricks and synthetics of various violent tints and textures. These buildings have their hearts more or less in the right place.

They want to look nice and are apologetic for the dull box shape the economics of real estate development have thrust upon them. But they know no way of pleasing their public other than the wearing of brighter dresses.

Gaudy strip

They are too circumscribed by economy and lack of imagination to be able to achieve a good appearance by some inherent intelligence. So our cities grow up without a touch of the unity, dignity and grace which marked all previous periods of construction.

The busiest and richest areas of redevelopment in all Melbourne — the western hill around William Street and St. Kilda Road — are tragic examples.

I don't think the word "tragic" is too emotional, because in St. Kilda Road, at least, the gaudy strip of petty new comic carnival buildings contrasts so sadly with the broad vision of the 19th-century planners who created the great road they are destroying.

Those buildings on the average are worse than one finds in any other developed Western

country of the kind with which we like to associate ourselves.

They are derived, of course, from American patterns — not by any means the best American, but the flashier American ones, which are flashier than buildings in any other country — and here they are copied without the elan, the sumptuousness and the luxuriant planting that make the American models seem so desirable.

They are an index to the sophistication of the average Australian board of directors and the level of the signs of the average Australian architect living on our isolated island. That is why I used the word "tragic".

15-year lag

Can we now look ahead over the coming three decades to the end of the 20th century and imagine what Australia will be like by then?

Although populations everywhere will be on the way to double what they are at present and the world will be getting uncomfortably crowded in some parts, it is not too vast a span for us to guess at its end, a full generation from now.

Assuming no violence to interrupt the slow development of our life, how will we be living when Sydney and Melbourne each are home to about five million people?

Will we still be cutting down trees, killing off various species of our wildlife, vandalising coral islands, killing suburbs with color, putting soft-drink signs on the roofs of any remaining colonial buildings, pasting up posters on every blank wall and stringing wires like cobwebs over the face of every community?

I doubt it. I think we are now nearing the bottom of the trough of vulgarity and carelessness in relation to our environment.

It was just nine years ago that the USA officially recognised urban ugliness when President Kennedy directed attention to it.

Allowing for the normal 15-year time lag, that means that six years from now, in the spring of 1985, our then Prime Minister will direct the Government's attention and some finance to an attack on the Australian ugliness.

move would help immensely and would encourage a vastly more cultivated public vision to develop.

Wires would go underground. Even Melbourne's trams might go. Advertising would be responsible.

Eventually public taste would ascend until, before the century ends, the natural leaf and bough of a living tree might have more popular appeal than a plastic rose.

The fundamental form, pattern, character of our urban life will be under enormous pressure for change during the next generation and the way we react to these pressures will determine the physical quality of the Australian living at the end of the century.

By the year 2000 it is quite possible that our cities will have moved so far in the direction they are headed now that they will not be recognisable as cities in the traditional sense of the term.

An undergrowth of a few houses and many little flat blocks will be spread without change of space or scale, without knots of increased activity, with a numbing evenness of architectural and economic approach, over thousands of acres, pressing always at a retreating front of farm paddocks still known as a rural belt, and stretching sticky fingers out to touch the nearest towns 50 or more miles away.

At irregular intervals, following no observable pattern, apartment blocks and offices will rise up to about 20 storeys like weeds out of the undergrowth. The biggest open spaces to be found will be the sections where poorer businesses and professional people have their offices in buildings half-a-century or so old.

This would be one of the depressed sections known by old names like Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide.

Planners' job

Such a community would not necessarily be unplanned. It would just be planned in a negative way. By then, no doubt expressways would slice through the undergrowth at reasonably frequent intervals.

A big staff of planners would be engaged in trying to keep more roads as well as the essential pipes and wires running after the little buildings and desperately zoning areas to try to keep industrial smog as far as possible from the newer houses.

It would need planning, but mainly corrective or negative planning; adding something here, cutting through a new lifeline there — patching continuously to keep the patient, the huge non-city, alive — so that those who live in it can ignore it and enjoy their lives as best they can by getting away from it in weekends to the far distant beaches, or staying where posted in front of super color 3D-TV sets.