

## MELBOURNE : SYMBOL OF OUR SPLIT IMAGE

"What's it like being back?" "How does Australia look?"

These questions from welcoming friends are bound to greet a returning traveller, and maybe after all the best thing about a trip abroad is the fresh view it gives of home.

A fresh view of Melbourne I looked forward to as the plane carrying me home broke through a thin ceiling of dark cloud over Essendon and hung above the suburbs, spread below like a vast patterned Axminster carpet stretched flat from bay to hills.

Shortly before leaving Australia two months earlier a question of Melbourne's public image had landed me in hot water. It happened like this.

At a public lecture in Canberra I spoke of the inconsistency which marks most of Australia's city-making endeavours. I mentioned the yellow flats, non-designed by speculators, which are destroying Melbourne's best residential areas. I likened the assortment of unrelated little shops that make up much of Melbourne's central commercial streets to a country town, which however changes as dramatically as a pantomime Cinderella when night falls. For the neons and the darkness then subdue the antagonistic buildings and unite them into an urbane whole.

Next day it seemed as if half of Melbourne's population jumped down my throat, and reverberations of my sacrilege still reached me a month later across the world. While sorry for the offence I gave to many good citizens, I cannot repent for saying these things. Every city is made up of good and bad parts, and Melbourne more than most. If anyone thinks I exaggerated on Melbourne's bad parts he cannot have seen a country town lately.

But now, as the plane circled low and the jagged teeth of Melbourne centre rose up against the bay, I wondered : which face of Melbourne,

the good or the bad, would predominate when looked at with fresh eyes and in the world context?

Already, from the air, the olive-grey foliage and the overall red-brown colour of the houses produced a strong sense that this was a countryside and a city of individuality in a world that is elsewhere predominantly green by nature and white by architecture. And on the ground for the few hours while the view remained fresh, before it was clouded again by memories and involvements, this sense of individuality remained.

Melbourne is unquestionably a city of character, and there is every reason to be surprised by this. For it was not endowed by nature with character, its growth has never been subjected to overall planning in the visual sense, and its main central artery is still the sort of street that most proud cities of the world tuck out of sight behind the amusement area.

But drive along Swan Street at dusk and look north across green paddocks to the fast growing skyline rising like a cardboard cutout, lit from behind by a pink sky and pierced with a thousand jewel lights. Look west from the hump of the South-Eastern freeway along a stretch of Yarra to the gardens and Government House. See the older spires and towers painted even grey by mist through the winter branches of Alexandra Avenue, or from the rise in front of the Myer Music Bowl. Stand on the forecourt north of the Shrine, one of the greatest spaces created near the heart of any city this century, and see Swanston Street transformed at a distance into a Versailles perspective. Walk with the well-heeled gentlemen on the tree-lined pavements of the western hill about William Street, where the money blooms and has no need for advertisements. You have been seeing one of the most civilized cities in the world, and you haven't yet looked at the top of Collins Street.

But it is no service to such good things of Melbourne and the numerous fine houses isolated throughout the suburbs to hush up certain plain facts. The good things are the result of last century's planning or of more recent individual isolated acts. No major city elsewhere is so lacking in visual town-planning policy to guide its new developments. Not that Melbourne is short of plans : for an underground, for helicopters, city squares, monorails... it just lacks an agreed policy or promise that could focus its citizens' enthusiasm.

In no other city can one find the most desirable residential areas being overrun by what can only be described as ignorant building - those many that have known no architect or trained designer having been built at the brink of slumdom with nothing more in mind than a quick-profit. Few cities would tolerate in and near its heart so many paint or paper advertisements, as distinct from illuminated signs, on almost every plain wall, bridge or fence. None has so few modern roads and such faint hope for more. None plants so many trees with one hand and saws or chops them to bits with the other.

But the good and the bad, the fine private endeavours and the limited community or civic sense, can't be separated. Some cities gain their character from geography, like Sydney and San Francisco. Some get it through architectural consistency, like London. Melbourne does it with contrasts : some of the most advanced buildings, world renowned, almost literally next door to some new designs so poor that they just could not happen in the big cities of any other developed western country in the year 1964.

Because of this ambivalence I think Melbourne is today the Australian city that best represents Australia - not to us perhaps but to our friends abroad. For our Australian image has changed lately. The old one of sun and biceps was perfectly represented by Sydney. A two-second newsreel shot of a Manly beach parade was about all that the northern

hemisphere knew of our culture, or wanted to know. But now it knows us also for exciting creative work in many fields : painting, music, theatre, medicine and some other branches of explorative science, domestic architecture.

All are fields in which individual originality, imagination and keen ideas still count. We are not known at all in co-operative enterprises which require a large team if not a community of more or less dedicated people with a common goal, such as film-making and town-planning.

We project a split image; the fine and the rough sides juxtaposed. This is to be seen in full colour in The Strand in London. On one hand the Australia House posters, nowadays as smart as paint and duly emphasizing our arts, sciences and industries. On the other hand the Australian Gift Shop with a window stuffed with koalas, boomerangs and mulga wood ornaments.

A London publisher said to me, "Anything Australian is the most 'with-it' thing in England today." Later the same day I overheard a West End lady telling her friend: "... these were typical Australians, you know. My dear, the man wore a hat! But surprisingly nice really..."

The rest of the world is beginning to know us to be out front in the race to satisfy modern man's insatiable hunger for productive or stimulating ideas, but this does not blind it to the crudenesses which, as we all know, still persist.

It is this combination of sophistication and naivete that so fascinates England about us today, and gives Australia in England's eyes a prestige almost akin to the glamour of America in Australia's eyes.

So in the long run neither the good nor the bad of Melbourne predominates. They need each other to create the city's character and make a vivid reflection of Australia at this turbulent stage of her cultural revolution.

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