

## TOTAL DESIGN

*I chose this title because TOTAL DESIGN*

~~This~~ will be the theme of the 1972 Convention of the Royal Australian

Institute of Architects to be held in Melbourne. *By T. D. we mean that every element of environment... can be/should be designed rather than left to grow messily... Architects see themselves ← SPECTRUM → (others do too!)*

*We have selected a little town near Melbourne; Present PLAN in models...*

To demonstrate what we mean by total, pervading good design, we have been supported by the local Council and the Minister for Local Government (Mr. Hamer) and we hope to have some support from the building industry. So a number of people will be looking at us rather hard to see what we do — to see what we think IS good design.

What is it? Can we tell you? The painful truth is that we — as an Institute of Architects — cannot. That is, all of us have some strong ideas about it, but we can't agree to a definitive style and say: that's it. Only 10 or 15 years ago we could have done just that. But then a lot of things were different 15 years ago, like families and students and international relations and PMs. Now the solid foundations have been kicked away.

The part of those solid foundations that supported architecture and design was a fervent, moralistic, almost religious belief in what we called Modern. It was plain, and usually white, and clean and uncluttered. Dream cities consisted of tall white and glassy skyscraper slabs with impeccable parklands below and wide expressways carrying remarkably few very streamlined cars threading around them. Pedestrians were safe on segregated walkways. Houses were clean boxes, ideally, like refrigerators or stoves. All that has changed. It was technologically and economically impossible to build such sterilized cities and, even if we could, nobody wants to anymore. The professional design world at this time is divided amongst itself. Half of it believes in a modified, slightly more humanised version of that impossible dream; and half is edging round to a position of embracing all the visual excitements that were virtually banned a decade ago: throwing the design disciplines out the window, wondering: Is our best living architect, after all, Colonel Sanders?

Technology always leads architecture. It may lead it soon into unexpected paths that destroy all conventional forms of building and architecture: such as pneumatic buildings, movable buildings, throwaway buildings, even synthesised buildings created simply by laser beams and holograms. All that may sound silly, but most of it may happen, eventually. Still, in the meantime, which will be quite long, the real issue in any discussion on how design can affect our environment, on what total design of the community might mean, revolves on appearances. What do we want of architecture, of the design that makes up almost our whole modern environment?

When I say that we architects and planners can't agree among ourselves, this <sup>question</sup> is what I mean. Of course we can agree on most techniques — separation of traffic from pedestrians, not cutting down all the trees, and so on — and we can agree on technologies — measurable, demonstrable constructional techniques that work or don't work. What we cannot agree on is: looks, aesthetics, beauty, delight, pleasing appearance (everyone seems to have a different name for it, as if it were a rather rude matter, better to be left unmentioned at all in polite company).

But whatever you call it, this is the real crunch in any discussion of architecture today.

When I ask what do we want of architecture, I am asking, very simply, how do "we" (i.e. society) want it to look? Because the usefulness, or the functional part, and the firmness, or the engineering part, are important only to the users, i.e. the occupiers and owners. Usefulness and firmness are tremendously important to them - but only to them. To everyone else the building is important only as an element of the visual environment.

When a city experiences a building boom such as Melbourne has been up on William Street hill, a number of buildings all conforming more or less to an agreed architectural/economic fashion combine to make a whole new visual environment. That's when the ~~old third rule~~ <sup>appearance</sup> of architecture becomes important. Walking along William Street today between the bland flat cliffs of reconstructed-stone and glass and tiles, differing only in colour and nicety of detail, that's when one should ask "what do we want of architecture?"

Now, the generation gap, or cultural split, or whatever you call it, has attacked architecture as viciously as it has the administration of any university. If you happen to hear architects arguing these days, or sense an argument in some discussion on building which you may read in the press, what it is all about is this:

On the one hand there are the square older architects who build in the tradition. Not in the traditional styles - classic or Spanish, etc. - but in the tradition which considers every building to be a monument of some sort: a 3D work of art (incorporating, of course, ~~usefulness & good structure,~~ <sup>usefulness & good structure,</sup> ~~commodity & firmness,~~ or it would be sculpture and not architecture) but still a work involving ~~human~~ <sup>controlled</sup> imagination and ~~invention and sensi-~~ <sup>a sense of design and order</sup> ~~bility~~ <sup>responding to known</sup> to human needs. The very squarest of the older architects may even add the word taste, yet that word is pretty suspect so it's rarely heard these days.

Anyway, the monumental tradition of the older architects' approach covers a vast range of modern buildings; from our ambitious Victorian Arts Centre and Canberra's National Library - to the bland, bald, boxy skyscrapers of millionaires' hill <sup>- the B & H sort of buildings</sup> - to the earthy, naked, fractured concrete of some of the younger architects' works which you may have noticed lately coming slowly into favour: Borland & Jackson's Malvern Baths, for instance, or Graeme Gunn's union building beside the Trades Hall.

But there is an opposition to the whole of that huge range of visual statements. The opposition classes all that in some such words as "the high culture of the elite" - some more elite than others. This opposition is made up, ~~as I've said,~~ of those who may be doing most of the designing of most of the buildings in the last part of the 20th. century: i.e. the rebel students and the untried graduates of today. They class all that kind of architecture as dead, or if not dead yet they are going to try to kill it. One of their spiritual leaders, a sort of Black Panther of architecture named Cedric Price, says: "I consider it unlikely that architecture and planning will match the contribution that Hush Puppies have made to society today." In short, they think that "establishment" architects are still living in an ivory tower, performing works of art, or taste (like the Arts Centre, or the Plumbers' Union building) which are utterly remote from what The People really want.

And what is it that the The People really want, in the rebels' opinion? Their suggestions take different forms, but the popular word for most of them is Pop. In other words, some ten years after the Pop movement was recognized in painting and sculpture - giant hamburgers and Campbell Soup cans and all that - Pop has come to architecture.

My friend and colleague Eric Westbrook, director of the National Gallery, made headline news recently by saying that we are in danger of having all the fun taken out of our lives in cities, by the "good taste" of architects and planners. (I think I quote him fairly correctly.) He was seeking visual fun in our streets, such as artists, he thought, could give them; and he thought that Canberra was the prize example of the sterile horror of planning: living there would be

nightmare! I agree with him that we need more fun - visual excitement - in our cities. But it is a tricky, dangerous business.

Late last year one of the most distinguished and advanced associations of architecture, the Architectural League of New York, held an exhibition of photographs of the work of - who? <sup>one of America's many great architects? No</sup> A man named Morris Lapidus, who does the corniest Hollywood-style interiors at Miami Beach.

(He's been called, by a non-admirer, "the Lawrence Welk of architecture"). By any standards at all his work is pseudo, phoney, lush and ludicrous. The fact that the Architectural League of New York now honours him indicates more clearly than anything the way the wind is blowing. It's like having a collection of photographs of the beef-burger joints, the poor-man's Americana of motels and fairy-light strings in Surfers Paradise, as a serious exhibition <sup>of art</sup> at the National Gallery of Victoria. ~~(And don't think that's impossible.)~~ It is, to my mind, a desperate last effort by some people, recognizing a very real crisis in the development of the environment, to get with what appears to be the up and coming strength.

But to consider <sup>all</sup> the thoughtless, careless, sucker-bait trimmings of commercial architectural show-business worthy of serious contemplation seems to me to be ~~more~~ evidence of ~~business~~ <sup>irresponsibility</sup>. I'm not suggesting that the bright-light, cutout visuals of a place like Surfers are ~~sick~~ <sup>irresponsible</sup>; far from it. <sup>They know what they want and are getting it.</sup> Only those who try to pretend that they are anything but a money-trap may be ~~little off colour~~ suffering a syndrome, as they say - the Surfers Syndrome in this case.

But I ask again: what do we want of architecture? Has society in fact got tired of serious design and urban planning - so soon, after it just got started in Canberra? Is life in <sup>that clean, green</sup> Canberra really a nightmare of prim prissy prettiness - enough to send one screaming in search of a flashing skysign for Chateau Gay <sup>wine?</sup> If so, how ~~come~~ <sup>does it happen that</sup> nearly everybody who lives there seems so happy about Canberra? Even the teenagers for whom, admittedly, the planners have done nothing, don't seem to be more discontent than those in any other city of only 125,000 people, or even those in Swinging Melbourne. Do people really resent the orderliness of Canberra - the landscaping, the lawns, the lake, the underground wiring, the highways? Is all that a sort of 1984 prison

for the soul, or is it, for the first time ever in Australia, just a good piece of urban housekeeping?

I am the first to admit that our Australian architecture and planning are not as exciting, as good as they should be. As I said earlier, I think many of our new city buildings, for example, are dull to tears. But there are reasons for that in our economy, our education, our dependence on foreign capital, and our other social complications. I think it fair to say that our architecture and our urban planning are on the same level as our engineering, our art, our cooking, our newspapers - in short, they are us. We won't improve the situation by turning back to a free-for-all, or turning to experts from overseas to help - both increasingly popular non-solutions to our problem. We need better architecture and planning: <sup>imaginative</sup> more exciting, more involving, more our own. And the way to get it is to demand it, to look-around us with more open eyes and to speak out about what we don't like. ~~And to think, and to ask, in short - again and again -~~ what do we want of architecture?" My own suggestion is that we want: order. We want the things around us to be considered and made carefully. We don't want good taste - which suggests uniformity of taste - but we do want deliberate taste. We want variety, not sterility, but each item in the variety done well in its own way - with ideas, and vitality, and sincerity, and always observing the one traditional <sup>theory or</sup> rule of architecture against which no one can or does attempt to argue: <sup>the rule that every building should be</sup> fit for its purpose, no matter what. Observing that rule, I think we can have fun and order in our streets at once. And that should be our aim.