

AUSTRALIA SQUARE

The first question is why anything so conspicuously round should be called square. The answer is that the name "Australia Square" refers to a redevelopment which consolidated more than thirty separate properties and some alley-ways into one island block of about one and a half acres in the most crowded part of Sydney. Much of this rectangular block has been left open as a public square. The tall cylinder is just the biggest of several elements built on it. The cylinder is also the architectural heart of the complex, but the open part - or plaza - is its social pulse and should be considered first.

This open area is by no means parkland. It has three floors of parking under it, and it is split across the middle by a 12-ft change of level. The plaza on the lower level slips in under the upper one and merges into a shopping arcade. The round tower rises from the upper plaza and a 13-storey rectangular office block fills the far end of the lower plaza. Nature is represented symbolically by a programmed fountain that changes from birthday - to wedding-cake shapes at irregular intervals, and five planting beds, each with a tree.

In short, the open space is as crowded as necessary to justify itself economically. Yet it is just open enough; it does work as intended. It is the most usable bit of fresh air for blocks around and is a smashing popular success. At any time of the day most of its cafe tables are occupied, and at lunch time it is packed. It is a warmly human space because it is humanly helpful and not because of any real or phoney warmth of materials, which it lacks. It is cool to the point of coldness in materials and generally austere in detail, as to be expected from Harry Seidler, who works in the mainstream tradition of modern architecture.

A strong attempt has been made to free the space at plaza level under the thirteen storey block. The columns have been drawn together at the base. Whether this device is successful is debatable. It eliminates the forest of verticals but substitutes some very sturdy branching trees. In any case this building is only a foil to the giant cylinder which is revealed gradually, from the bottom up, as you walk from the shadows of those trees on to the lower plaza.

The tower is not a fashionable building. That is said in praise. Yet at the time it was designed, seven or eight years ago, it would have been much more fashionable, for at that time buildings with plans that were round or square or of any other basic geometrical shape, were still quite the rage. It was constructed quickly once work on site began, the floors piling up and leaving one guessing as to the ultimate height, lacking a steel frame which would have sketched in the outline. But before that there was much backing and filling, including contretemps over acquisition of land and light angles. It could have been the highest reinforced-concrete building in the world at the time, but it finished just behind Montreal's Place Victoria. So the design remained an idea for some years while architectural fashion scrambled on into a new era of diagonal complexity fractured by protrubrances. Australia Square Tower, as well as being simply cylindrical, is unfashionably bland and smooth. It does not attempt a great stride forward, which makes it refreshingly normal. It claims attention not through momentary excitement but because of explicit simplicity.

It is a beautifully made building, neither under-nor-over detailed, avoiding any suggestion of arrogant coarseness as well as effete elegance. You simply are not conscious of the technique, as you should not be when confronting any work of art, unless you are professionally involved in it.

The two main, lower floors which have to carry double the loading of the upper office floors, were designed by Pier Luigi Nervi. He used characteristic curved, crossing ribs on the soffits, which may not be the simplest structural solution for a span of 35 feet but look at home in the circular context.

The fin-like external columns taper in most reasonably as they climb and their load is lightened, but this taper is not exaggerated. It is less than four feet in the 50 storey height and is not immediately noticeable.

If there is one detail that might be called an affectation it is the change of colour in the precast concrete of the horizontal panels between the windows. The beam section is white, the non-structural spandrel is dark. Whether this is done for ornamental or moral reasons, it is worth mentioning only because it is the one detail that might be questioned on rational grounds.

Since the tower is so impeccably done, so sensible and convincing, the question of its roundness becomes all the more insistent; for without doubt roundness in plan has often been a mark of commercial gimmickry. Moreover, the formal justification of a round tower rests to a great extent on its being isolated. This tower does command Sydney at the moment but the city has embarked on a height race and soon a neighbouring office block will reach above it.

Yet even the roundness of the plan is explained by the architect in matter-of-fact terms. It was, he says, derived by a process of elimination: from a rectangle, to a square, to a square on the diagonal, and thus to a circle. The last not only gave better outlooks, it actually made a greater floor area permissible, for the building code allowed the setback from each boundary to be measured to the average point of the curved surface facing it.

The tower, then, is convincing and confident, extending radial lines out across its plaza and raising echoes of circles in all the planting pockets and benches of its furnishings. Yet all this close harmony ends abruptly at that 13-storey block, which bears little or no relation to the rest. It has elaborate sunshades and is even different in colour. This is inconsistency but not actual conflict. The only real crunch in Australia Square has nothing directly to do with the architecture.

It is the art, which has been introduced with love and lavishness, but is a minor misfortune. Two tapestries, by Le Corbusier and Vasarely respectively, hang, or flop in a dog-eared way as tapestries do, above the two main banks of elevator doors. They appear unhappily temporary on the travertine background and one can only hope they will go away eventually, for they do nothing for the building. But a larger item which appears immovably permanent is a 38 feet high Calder stabile which manages to find a foothold at the base of the tower. Allowing that Calder is a master of shapes and images, what he does to those poor old steel sheets - lapping and welding at random, torturing them into spikes - is in total conflict, an innocent but nonetheless direct intellectual snub, to the rational, respectful use of materials in the building itself. The stabile looks almost as incongruous as all the neon junk in the streets outside the cool architectural oasis of Australia Square.