

NO QUOTAS FOR ARCHITECTURE

Perhaps the most visually exciting magazine in the world is Domus, an architectural extravaganza from Italy. At a time when magazines everywhere are suffering from advertising deficiency, Domus is so indispensable in its field that it prospers just on healthy subscriptions. It looks like tomorrow, but it can't be called trendy for it starts trends. The Domus Style of interior design is one of the inmost styles of this day.

Well, in a late issue of this commanding journal, five big beautiful colored photographs of the Sydney Opera House are prominently featured. They were taken by an international star of multi-media-design, Charles Eames, of the USA, who passed through Sydney on a world trip late last year. The captions explain that the extraordinary building, all controversy now forgotten, is nearing completion.

A little earlier, another leading figure in the design world, J. M. Richards, of London, visited us. On returning home he reported on our architecture — as you may recall, for his article was quoted in The Australian — using words such as dreariness, monotony, primitive, disaster, vulgar, and: too few convictions.

Now, which of those two items of overseas publicity for Australian Culture do you find more cockle-warming and which more offensive? Which, dear reader — you being, I take it, a normal hot-blooded Australian with an ever alert sensitivity to national insult?

Many people were insensed by Pommy Richards' rude remarks, while the Domus feature on the Opera House, though not popularly publicised, caused the backbones of some Australians who saw it to tingle with pride.

Yet consider the respective backgrounds. J. M. Richards unquestionably said those critical, cruel, quotable things, but he also gave some perceptive praise, such as: "Australian architecture is much better than it looks... Sydney and Melbourne are unusually unlucky in that some of their worst buildings are the most conspicuous while some worthy buildings lie almost invisibly imbedded." He meant smaller buildings in the suburbs.

Charles Eames, who took the opera house pictures, was far more scornful in his own subtle way. Ignoring an invitation from our Institute of Architects to speak, he evidently found that the only architecture here to interest him was the opera house, which of course is not Australian architecture.

The fact is that Australian architecture enjoys a reputation with northern hemispherians no higher and no lower than the rest of our cultural achievements — which puts us, in their eyes, roughly on the creative level of Madagascar. Most find Australia as they expect to find it: a cultural desert sprouting one Danish blossom. No worse than most of the USA, perhaps, but minus the surprises, excitements — nothing not seen at home fifteen years ago.

Richards paid us the not inconsiderable compliment of looking hard, seeing behind the predictable facade some sparkles of hope, and in general contemplating us as if we were almost part of his world.

And does it matter what these visiting architects thought? Does it matter what other topnotch American and English architects, who are visiting us constantly these days, think of our standards of creative talent? Indeed it does. It matters very much more than if an international literary critic, for instance, fails to appreciate Hal Porter.

For such architect visitors often are on talent-scouting missions for big companies which are about to invest — or invest more deeply — in this country, and which need buildings.

When the scouts return home and report that the natives are dangerous the English and American boards of directors know immediately what to do: they send out one of their own architects.

Millions of dollars worth of buildings for Sydney and Melbourne are now being planned in the USA (not all for American companies), and Australian architecture in the field of big buildings promises to be one day as creatively, excitingly Australian as Kellogg's cornflakes.

The only answer to this threat — if you consider the exclusion of architecture a threat to culture — is for the genuine worthy Australian buildings which "lie invisibly imbedded" to come out in the open where the talent-scouts for our new

breed of colonists can see them. Which means first a little more trouble being taken by Australian building promoters to ensure that they explore the imbedded treasure done by — to quote J. M. Richards again — "architects of such talents that they ought to be engaged on buildings that contribute more to the total environment."

The situation is only a reflection of a fairly general Australian condition.

We mustn't complain if visitors scorn our architecture. It is not as good as it should be — like our films, television, magazines, hotel service, and about a hundred other things. But it does have vital, creative strains which are unencouraged. And there are no quotas for Australian content in architecture.

Yet for the first time ever Australian architecture now has to compete in the open world market to claim the plums in its own backyard.

CAPTION TO ILLUSTRATION

A splendid American architectural group in Melbourne: St. James Building, The AMP tower, and Shell Corner, in William Street; all designed by Skidmore Owings & Merrill of San Francisco.