

The schizophrenic style

ARCHITECTURE

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ARCHITECTURAL criticism is all but dead. Certainly many small buildings — houses — receive public attention. Praise, in fact, is often poured on them like chocolate syrup by the home magazines and the real estate pages of the dailies. And some big buildings attract solemn statistical notice in the financial pages. But it is rare for any building, even an opera house or an art gallery, to be reviewed seriously in a newspaper.

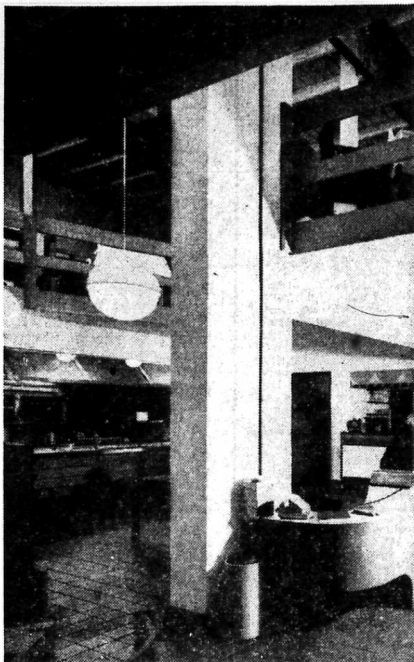
There's a good reason. It is in the schizophrenic nature of architecture. A building may be an object of art, but it is a socio-economic object as well. It may be poor art but valuable socially or economically, and vice versa.

Also, architecture, even considered as a visual object, consists of the control of numerous elements including technical and financial secrets that are not seen in the finished building. In the architectural profession there is more than a suspicion that any appraisal of a building which falls to analyse the plumbing is superficial.

Nevertheless, the finished object is all that could possibly be of public interest, and it can be art — that is, imaginative, inventive, sensitive. You may put the lack of criticism down to the fact that so few buildings possess any such qualities. Or you may decide that so few are objects of artistic interest because of the lack of serious criticism.

Anyway, consider Building No. 1. It is a new restaurant in Lonsdale Street, Melbourne, called The Legend. It has a single-fronted, single-storeyed facade hardly bigger than the Diner's Club sticker on its window. Entering, you find yourself in a long, low, narrow room no bigger than any single-fronted shop. But at the far end a dazzle of light and color beckons.

Like most good architecture this restaurant holds



PART of The Legend restaurant, Melbourne (architect, Kevin Borland).

PHOTOGRAPHER: MARK STRIZIC

its cards close to its chest. It reveals its strengths gradually. The narrow entrance leads to a high, wide open space with a bar and more tables. Ahead is rugged wooden stairs leading down to other small levels of dining, and up to the main floor. Altogether there are four levels of dining, and from some vantage points one may see all at once. The spaces have been deliberately manipulated to make this possible. It is a continuous but casually contorted space, focused on a tall window which is fully occupied by a magnificent tree that remarkably survived this former shop.

The building has many other felicitous details including a series of seven paintings by Leonard French. These came from

the original Legend milk bar in the old Tivoli theatre, on whose site an office building is now rising. The old Legend is now just that. It was an excitingly original creation of 1955. A then struggling artist named Clement Meadmore designed it, as a change from making stools and lampshades. He has since wiped his hands of Australia and is one of New York's more successful sculptors. Leonard French was paid \$500, in instalments, for his contribution.

The new Legend has the Frenches, and color, and a charming naivete in rough timber details which lend it an elusive Australian flavor. But its success depends chiefly on that purely architectural quality in the spaces given it by its architect, Kevin Borland.

Possibly its waiters, running up and down all those stairs, occasionally ponder on the schizophrenia of architecture, but from the viewpoint of the luncher or diner the Legend is a visual delight. And it is especially notable for its purity and simplicity in a period when eating and drinking houses are ransacking the wreckers' yards and second-hand shops for atmospheric "colonial" gimmicks.

Now for Building No. 2. It is a block of flats at 15 Collins Street, Melbourne. From the viewpoint of social function it is highly commendable. We architects have been winning for decades about the need to bring life back to the dead hearts of our cities. This is one of the very few buildings in Australia to restore living quarters to the commercial jungle.

As a visual object in Collins Street, however, it is as naive as the Legend, but in a different way: unintentionally. It is tall and thin, and the shaft of dark red bricks is broken at random by white balconies of various lengths. This is a thoroughly successful device which indicates, and lends external identity to, the variety of flat designs within. The building strikes its difficulties at the top and bottom.

At the top the lift motor and tank rooms — those embarrassing necessities to every tall building — are not co-ordinated in the overall design, and are not hidden in a false floor (the more usual easy way out) but are simply made of cloud-colored bricks in the hope that no one will see them against the sky.

At the bottom, beneath the spreading boughs of Collins Street's trees, the lower floors are treated as if they formed a separate, third, building. They have embossed bronzed metal walls, an irregular angular inlet to the entrance and that ever-popular curved canopy over the doorway. All these elements are foreign to each other and to the matter-of-fact tower which rises above them. Evidently someone demanded something to wow buyers in from Collins Street.

I hope that the building is a resounding financial success so that it will encourage more flats into the city. But I must also hope that later ones are less visibly schizophrenic.