

A LEAD FROM THE PLUMBERS

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It is that rare kind of building because its architect, Graeme Gunn, chose to mould its essential functional elements into a sculptural form. This is not to say that it is some kind of sculpture, which would be fighting words to an architect. I mean only that its form, which is made up of nothing but the bare essentials, transcends those essentials and becomes an object of visual significance to all who use it and to most who walk or drive past it — provided they have not lost the faculty of seeing.

The particular form that it has taken is chunky, strong to the point of looking muscle-bound, and angular — most of the angles being 45 degrees. Its looks are appropriate to the use of the building, and at the same time they are fashionable. In case that sounds like more fighting words — a studied insult to any architect — I should explain rapidly what sort of fashion I mean. I mean the ruling fashion of the most advanced international architects. This chunky fashion may now be some five or six years old, but it is still secure today.

It would be nice to think that Australian architecture — that all architecture — could keep driving ahead independently, always high above fashion; but that would be quite unrealistic. It is impossible and entirely undesirable for any artist, and especially an architect, to remain aloof from the mood of his times. One takes for granted that an intelligent and creative worker will, indeed, contribute to his era's mood, interpret it, and direct it.

Anyway, the Plumber and Gasfitters Union building is undeniably an internationally fashionable building, and in a country where nearly all new buildings are twelve years and six months behind the high international fashion, that is in itself a remarkable quality.

Another remarkable quality — an Australian capital city 'First' — which this union building can claim is that the bare essentials of which it is composed are left bare. It is made of reinforced concrete, like 99 out of 100 other city office blocks but, unlike the others, it exposes the fact without embarrassment. No bricks, stone, or tiles cover the neatly made concrete surfaces. (They were poured against formwork with a wood-grain marking, the effect of which is deliberately exaggerated in the picture above.) The bare concrete gives the building a monolithic earthy purity which removes it to a different plane from the flashier commercial buildings down in the city centre.

There are some people who will never like naked concrete. It is a sort of architectural "Oh, Calcutta" to them. Yet it is bound to grow in use and popularity here as it has, over half a century or so, nearly everywhere else. It will grow partly as a reaction to the shallow chi-chi cosmetics of most commercial and investmane building, and partly for purely practical reasons. Once it is built there's practically nothing that can go wrong with naked concrete. It is not subject to moulting. It does not rely on miracle glue, as do many buildings which have pretty tiles or bits of glass or stone mosaic stuck all over them.

The last time an Australian trade union sponsored architecture was, to the best of my knowledge, in 1916. That was when the wharf Labourers' Union asked the eccentric architect Robert Haddon to design their headquarters in Flinders Street, Melbourne. Haddon produced a highly coloured facade in the Art Nouveau style, which was then about 16 years out of fashion in the international scene but today would be in again if it still stood. It would be exceedingly Pop. Fixed high on the front wall against a backing of orange-colored tiles, two green copper prows of strange, exotic ships projected far out over the footpath.

Unfortunately the building does not still stand. In 1954 the union rebuilt on the same site. I made a mild protest, for the green verdigris ship-prows had become one of the novelty sights of Melbourne. The union secretary rang me and offered the ships to me. Within hours they were delivered, but without the support of the wall they had collapsed into an unmanageable tangle of paper-thin copper sheeting and hefty wrought-iron framing members. While I was puzzling what to do with the twin wrecks, burglars visited and stripped all the copper from the steel framing. That was the end of Robert Haddon's happiest and last notable building, and the first Australian union adventure in high style architecture.

One has a feeling that an element of accident accompanied the Wharfies' choice of Robert Haddon as their architect back in 1916.

But not so with this new building. The Plumber and Gasfitters Employee Union knew what they were doing. Mr. Brian Miers, the State Secretary, says that they were well aware that their architect was giving them a potentially controversial design — and a small minority of members were critical, and wanted something with more conventional looks. However, a majority of the Committee of Management voted for the design and now it is accepted generally — and positively liked by many.

Of course, the plan is fairly conventional and works well. That helps.