

Trad modern, pop modern

WHICH CITY is to be the cultural capitol of Australia? It's an exciting contest. Will Adelaide's determined biennial bid wrest away the crown worn traditionally by Melbourne? Or will the new-look Moomba re-wrest it back? Will Sydney, sardonically watching from above, never be shaken in her confidence that as biggest and nearest to the front door she can have no rivals? Or will Perth, the long shot, come racing through in the later 70s?

No. Two other places vie for the gum-leaf wreath.

One most likely candidate is Canberra. You think I'm joking. And I must admit that a quick look around Australia's capital today might not convince everyone about its cultural backbone. On the surface it is still just a pretty city — doubtless the prettiest in Australia and unquestionably the best kept. Yet that very quality of good housekeeping leads some taxpayers to decide that Canberra is too complacent and prim — that it is the very spirit of smug suburbia isolated in the bush. However, Canberra is like a brilliant flowering gum. It took a long time in growing before it was ready to flower, but there is every reason to believe that it is ready now. The next few years are likely to see a transformation rather like the instant-city growth of Melbourne after the gold rush.

The other likely candidate is Surfers Paradise. Now you think I'm being facetious, but I am not. Surfers and Canberra are at the opposite ends of the spectrum — the pop and elite ends respectively, to

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use rather tired in-words — but it is the same single spectrum of Australian culture.

I have to admit to being somewhat facetious in using the term cultural capital at all; but you know what I mean. Melbourne used to claim it largely on the strength of having at least one legitimate theatre operating almost all the time. But also a pervading sense of vitality is required in all the arts — and especially in the most visible one, architecture. When Melbourne wore the gum-leaf wreath a decade or so ago she was also the undisputed centre of creative architecture in Australia.

Nobody goes to Surfers to see the architecture. Nonetheless it is part of what they see, and a very important part of the fun. All that color blazing in the clear sun, all the shapes and signs calling for attention, all the allusions to a distant land of unattainable glamor "Miami Waters," "Vegas Villas" must be counted as architecture along with the National Library in Canberra. That is, they are deliberately contrived to create an external impression. They are only rarely careless or primitive buildings like most farmer's sheds or suburban houses. The newer ones at least are mostly consciously created objects of culture — from, of course, the extreme pop end of the spectrum.

There are today many people of the greatest intellectual attainments and/or pretensions who value this end of the spectrum more



The two ends of the spectrum of Australian architecture: Canberra and Surfers.

highly than the other. For instance, recently the distinguished Architectural League of New York held an exhibition of photographs of the work of an architect named Morris Lapidus, who is responsible for many of the millionaire traps along Miami beach, including the well-known "Fountain-blue" megahotel.

Lapidus' lobby interiors are made up of great spaces, chandeliers, curly chromium trimmings, ankle-deep carpets and indoor planting on the scale of rain forests. They look like sets from a comedy-romance on Late Night Movie. To complete the picture you need Cary Grant in a sculptresque white tuxedo, hurrying down one of the sweeping circular staircases to greet Irene Dunne.

Lapidus has been described by a non-admirer as "the Lawrence Welk of architecture." The elevation of his work to gallery status is not, however, surprising. It follows inevitably from the pop-kitch camp cults. To New Yorkers it offers a sympathetic, if slightly tongue-in-cheek view of the image which Surfers' workshops with its tongue hangs out.

The difference between Lapidus' lush extravagance and most of Surfers' poor-man's version is not too important. Surfers is learning

all the time. But essentially it won't change, even when it gets more sophisticated. Most of the architecture of Surfers is deliberately irresponsible — that is, discarding the social, structural and other disciplines, especially the good taste, which characterise the buildings of Canberra.

The buildings of Canberra also won't change essentially, even when they get more sophisticated, which is happening at this very moment. The latest Canberra buildings — including some huge government office blocks still on the drawing board, the temporarily frozen design for the National Gallery, the big defence office block nearing completion on a hill overlooking the airport — all these are designs of high international standard — imaginative, original, strong — which cannot be said of course about many of the existing buildings. Yet they observe the same disciplines and traditional architectural values.

But are younger people growing tired of serious design and luxurious landscaping and meticulous urban housekeeping? Is Canberra really, as some critics suggest, suffocatingly prim, prissy and pompous — enough to send one screaming in

search of a flashing skysign for Chateau Gay? Do some people really resent the orderliness of Canberra — the lawns, the lake, the freeways, the underground wiring, the controlled advertising? Yes, some do, and some others abominate Surfers.

This is a growing conflict in taste, but it is unreasonable, just as my opening remarks in search of a cultural capital were clearly ridiculous; because there is room for both Canberra and Surfers, and we should be grateful for the differences between them and all the other cities along the spectrum between them.

Canberra represents traditional architectural morals: to make a better world, to save the world from itself. Surfers represents mod freedom: to let the world do its own thing.

There is a need for both approaches, and room for both in appropriate places across the breadth of Australia. It cannot be said that one is right and the other is wrong. But it certainly can be said that there is good and bad design in each type of architecture — which should be the only criterion for judging it.