

## THE NEW ARCHITECTURE

An architecture of the 20th century - free from any undue influence of historic styles and at home with the new technology - was late in coming to Australia. The first three decades of the century were spent in hard pioneering work by men such as Annear and Griffin, struggling to keep sane values when all around them curled the nonsense of Queen Anne and Art Nouveau fretwork. The fourth decade saw the movement towards reasonableness and direct simplicity established in the pioneering work of Roy Grounds in Melbourne and later Sydney Ancher in Sydney. The next decade, the nineteen-forties, was occupied by war and recovery. It was not until the nineteen-fifties that Australian architects as a body got the feel of the new, free, creative approach to problems of design. Then the more advanced ways of building and the cleaner details which had been developed by the tiny avant-garde of the 'forties gradually spread into the everyday practices of commercial designers and spec builders. This prepared the ground for the present decade, the nineteen-sixties, and the new architecture.

It is difficult to generalise accurately about the architectural style of any country in any period. Even in ancient Greece there were more styles than the one which the tourist knows. As well as temples the Greeks needed utilitarian buildings, and houses for the rich, and flats for the poor, and all had different artistic approaches. How impossible, then, to try



to sum up the restless modern Australian scene in a word or two! Yet it may be allowable to divide our present architecture into no more than three categories.

The first and largest is the vernacular: the commonplace workaday design. We must remember that more than half the buildings under construction today have not been favoured with the attentions of a professional architect. Moreover, about half of what remains has been designed in a rather casual way by architects who are no better than they ought to be. Thus most buildings follow some routine pattern or are based loosely on a magazine illustration presented by a determined client. This is the way most houses, shops, motels and other small commercial enterprises take shape: it is what we can call Pop Architecture. The elements used at the present time are louvres, chequer-board panels, trios of arches, and so on, all brilliantly coated in black, gold, and random colours. These things are the modern equivalent of gargoyles and antimacassars; and they are fairly international. Pop Architecture is bad enough in the United States, where most of its ideas originate, but somehow it is worse here, more vapid for being unoriginal, and lacking even the trace of sophistication which sometimes glosses it in America.

So much for the casual or frivolous design of most of the products of Australia's largest secondary industry, the building industry. The small proportion that remains may



be called serious architecture, and it can be divided into the two other categories: professional, and creative.

So late was 20th century design in coming to Australia, it was not taught or accepted in the schools of architecture as a general rule until after the Second World War - long after most of the best-established architects now in practice finished their training. Thus today most important buildings, and practically all big important buildings, are designed in large offices under the control of men who were not trained in the modern idiom but who changed from a traditional approach to Modernism, from pillars to posts, in middle professional life. Under these circumstances one should not expect to find impassioned and single-minded conviction in their work, or revolutionary scepticism against the classical rules - such as the rules of proportion, of focal interest, and of balanced visual repose. And one does not find very fresh qualities in the busy city streets. Rather, the development of big commercial and public buildings is essentially evolutionary - in both fields of design and construction. Family resemblance can be traced back from most modern skyscrapers to pre-war office blocks, which were only slightly shorter and only slightly less glassy. And those blocks of the nineteen-thirties had only recently thrown off pseudo-classical mouldings and were otherwise similar to the offices of the nineteen-twenties. So nowadays, although lots of glass is obligatory and most historical



forms of ornament have been banished, still a great proportion of our most careful and biggest commercial and governmental building remains essentially traditional, or conservative, in concept. This is the intention of the owners or promoters, who would be displeased if their architects presented them with anything else. The big architects usually correctly interpret their clients' wishes in regard to appearance by injecting conservative forms with a judicious flavouring of new materials, and by designing the whole with considerable skill, and with a genuine desire to do the best, and with taste. Thus this work is most correctly described as professional.

Is there a happy medium between the vulgar vernacular, or Pop Architecture, and this rather unexciting, literally square, professional category? No, there is no happy medium. There is an alternative, but it is not medium and it is earnest rather than happy; <sup>it is</sup> the second of the two serious categories mentioned above: ~~it is~~ the creative category.

Creative architecture usually happens when some promoter of a building wants to build more than just a useful or profitable thing, and picks his architect for artistic as well as professional reasons. Promoters of this kind, and architects prone to be so picked, are more plentiful now in Australia than ever before. The architects may often be personally full of doubts and anxieties, but they belong to the infinitely



confident and optimistic international band of creative designers who believe that every building should be a vital expression of life and society. In Australia, most of these architects belong to the generation which has grown up in the new free architectural climate, which never knew the restraint of classical and traditional rules. Nevertheless they have other ideological problems of their own, most of these stemming from the absence of an older generation to guide them. As they grew up in architecture, these younger people saw only confusion in the generation of their teachers and bosses. They saw the early concept of Functionalism ("Form Follows Function") gradually disparaged and by now almost wholly dismissed. They note that the more commercial designers have succumbed to old temptations and now are back again making buildings pretty with arcades, frilly with grilles, effete with nostalgic effects from many irrelevant exotic sources. They hear their elders and betters denouncing the "naive" and "inhuman" approach of the modern pioneers, as exemplified by Gropius and the work of the Bauhaus, and yet having no new theory to replace the old rationalism.

The established architecture of today is undeniably lacking a spiritual anchor. A favourite topic of architectural conferences is: 'Wither Architecture?' - or words to that effect, with everyone asking: 'What do we believe in?' One of the cleverest architects alive, a leader of the newly established generation, Philip Johnson of New York, says:



"There is only one absolute today and that is change. There are no rules....only the feeling of a wonderful freedom, of endless possibilities to investigate, of endless past years of historically great buildings to enjoy."

That may be a fine eclectic philosophy for a sophisticated New Yorker, but it reads like a broken signpost at the end of a long road which we once thought would lead to a vital, realistic architecture for this century.

Today's young architect, thus deserted by his guides, is faced at once with quite obvious alternatives. Most easily he can follow the stylish Americans in making elegant caricatures of historical forms. If a feeling of reality and a sense of the present are discounted, all sorts of exciting, curious or impressive effects are quite easily achieved. There is much of this kind of pseudo-serious design in Australia; for example, the great supermarket block in Canberra's Civic Centre, which looks monumental and classical enough to be at least the National Valhalla.

Alternatively he may join the counter-reaction to such irrelevant visual effects: the predominantly European movement which sometimes calls itself rather proudly the New Brutalism, being in open revolt against facile prettiness and all forms of decorative sham. There is not much brutalism in Australia. Nevertheless, any serious architect must



feel some sympathy for this approach. While he may reject the crudeness of some of the more self-consciously rebellious brutalism, still he often feels drawn - morally and logically - to a large part of the theory of stringent simplicity and honesty for which the early 20th century pioneers crusaded.

Effete elegance, or brutal honesty- these two extremes present the serious young architect of today with an artistic and moral choice much more difficult than the choice between Gothic and Classic that faced architects just a century ago. It is a moral issue because the temptation are heavily on the side of elegance. Continuously through everyday practice the architect today is called upon to reconcile the good old theories of simplicity and genuineness with the vulgar abundance of seductive new materials - pre-curved, pre-pierced, pre-gilded - provided in an endless and multiplying stream by modern technology, urged on by modern commerce.

Elegance or brutality.....Which of the two extreme paths does the Australian creative architect follow? The happy answer to this key question is: at present, neither. The mood of the younger, more advanced and creative architects in Australia today is reassuringly balanced. It is not vacillating or wandering, but determinedly and clear-headedly in the centre of the road. This may be largely due to our isolation, to the fact that our architects work to a great extent outside the pressures of the international



rat-race to professional fame. There is practically no professional avant-garde in Australia in the international sense. There are very few architects who apparently feel any compulsion to prove their cleverness to other architects.

Thus the development of our more serious, creative architecture is moving along nicely, at a steady pace, not at all far from the lines that were set down by the pioneer modernists at the beginning of this century and maintained by others sporadically through the thirties. It is good, conscientious architecture, not fashionable, doctrinaire, or self-consciously advanced.

It is true that a lot of the fun has left modern architecture. The old revolutionary's compulsive use of new materials and mad-scientist methods is dead. The exaggerated shapes and funny peculiar roofs are gone. For better or worse, a lot of experimentation is gone.

*In the new architecture,*  
Form is diagrammatic - explainable in words, materials are unadorned, paint is scarce, budgets low, details are uncomplicated and un-clever. The simplicity is not merely a negative visual plainness, as of plaster over a concealed frame. It results from an aim to create structure well and unaffectedly, from the ground up. This constructional simplicity may often look intricate, as in some of the timber work in these pages, but the external visual effect is not as important as the internal cleanliness or orderliness.



Yet dull orderliness is by means all there is to this architecture. In order to achieve simplicity and clarity each problem has to be thought out from scratch with the object of imposing an artistic order upon it. In this way a particular planning pattern or structural theme most suited to the problem is discovered. This theme or pattern is then developed through the building while all elements which might interfere with it are subjugated. The value of the resulting architecture is in its strength of character, *even when this character* is not unique or even very novel.

This approach is to be ~~formed~~<sup>found</sup> today not only in residential work, where one might expect such unrushed and single-minded devotion to an idea, but also in smaller commercial and public buildings, and even sometimes in usually frenzied enterprises such as bowling-alleys.

No one would suggest that this cultivated and quite sophisticated development of the 20th century movement is at this time the customary or popular building style of Australia. It is only becoming the most familiar style of the small proportion of buildings which is seriously desired, by a sympathetic team of promoter and architect, to be good architecture. A selection of buildings representative of the style is illustrated in the following pages. It must be presented with the familiar but always necessary apologia for the inadequate coverage. Numerous other equally representative and perhaps better buildings could have been included



if space were available. There has been a deliberate concentration on younger architects and recent buildings. The objects are to indicate as concisely as possible the character of the style at this moment and to suggest its overall consistency even while showing that it allows a few personal tastes and mannerisms to come through.

No one would suggest that this work is uniquely Australian. There are <sup>hint</sup> ~~limits~~ of many outside influences. But overall the flavour is not New Yorkerish or Japanese or Latin American, to mention the three dominating world fashions of this moment. More significant, there is no evidence here of undue imitation of the personal styles of international star architects. This work is almost as relaxed as the old country homesteads of Australia in their utterly unpretentious horizontal style under droopy iron hats. This work is a branch of international modern design that is characteristically Australian, and it is being produced in sufficient quantities to be classed as mature, in a youthful way, and to be called the new architecture of Australia.



1.

COURTYARD OF THE BRYANT HOUSE AT WAHROONGA, N.S.W., by  
Geoffrey Twibill.

2, 3, 4.

QANTAS TECHNICAL CENTRE at Mascot Airport, Sydney, by Collard,  
Clarke and Jackson.

This complicated industrial building manages to organise externally the diverse activities of a technical training centre and a data processing centre into a single artistic entity. While it uses only familiar industrial materials such as glass and steel in box-like forms without eaves or ornaments, it builds up a distinguished and individual effect by the clarity of its separate blocks, the fine spaces between them, the subtle earthy colouring, and above all by the strict consistency of the treatment.

5, 6.

THE HERBET HOUSE AT HUNTER'S HILL, N.S.W., by Don Gazzard  
(of Clarke, Gazzard, Yeomans and Associates).

Because it was on a hemmed-in, narrow site, this house turned inward to a patio which became the view, living-space and architectural theme. Let no-one be misled by the white-wash into thinking this is Spanish, or by the paper lampshades into imagining it is Japanese.



7-9.

THE ALLEN HOUSE AT MOUNT COLAH, N.S.W., by Ian McKay.

The sympathetic Allen house on its rocky mound has a complex image unusual in this company. In fact its theme of rugged brick verticals and light timber horizontals, obviously inspired by the rock formation, is logically developed from a clear plan in which night and day living sections occupy separate squares.

10, 11.

THE ANGLISS HOUSE AT FRANKSTON, VICTORIA, by Leslie M. Perrott and Partners.

The plans of this house at a beachside suburb is a picture of neatness. A straight stair runs across the middle of a square. On the Ground floor a livingroom occupies the whole of on one side, service rooms the other - Upstairs, bedrooms are on both sides. Then a verandah has been added all round. The skill lies in the way this formal arrangement has been translated into an external image which actually surpasses the plan in diagrammatic neatness.

12.

PARRAMATTA BOWL AT PARRAMATTA, N.S.W., by Herbert F. Hely and Noel Bell.



The extraordinary thing about this 28-lane bowling alley building is not the unadorned state of its simple materials - steel frame, concrete block, natural wood - nor the fact that it preserved and used as its only ornaments the trees that grew on the site. The extraordinary thing is that such a sensible and sensitive approach could prosper in, of all things, a bowling alley.

13 - 16.

BLUES POINT FLATS AT SYDNEY, by Harry Seidler.

This block beside the Harbour Bridge is one of the very few tall buildings which can be credited with the new maturity of expression. Its theme is clear: a thin needle almost square in plan with flats on four sides of a central core of lifts and stairs. The spare austerity of details, as seen in the close-up, is not permitted to multiply into dullness over the giant exterior. Two kinds of windows - full-height for livingrooms, slits for other rooms - are alternated, giving the twenty-five-storey facades an orderly, genuine, and rare vitality.

17.

RETIREMENT VILLAGE HOUSE AT CASTLE HILL, N.S.W., by Geoffrey Twibill.

The courtyard, as noted earlier, has become so familiar as to be almost a symbol of the new architecture. It symbolises the



change of visual emphasis from the decorative treatment of solid details to effects of space and vistas, and to the semi-sheltered, semi-shaded pleasures of living that lie between claustral confinement and the great outdoors. The courtyard below is from a Church of England retired people's village and won an Illuminating Engineers' Society award for artificial lighting "for atmosphere and environment".

18, 19.

THE STOCKBRIDGE HOUSE AT DONCASTER, VICTORIA, by Grahame Gunn.

The plan is long, straight and narrow, in order to present all important rooms to the north aspect. The structure is strongly expressed in big, grey, undressed wooden posts, beams, hand-rails and braces. At one end the ground falls away, providing space for cars and the entrance stairway, and the underside of the floor frame is seen to be a V, matching the low gable pitch of the roof. All is direct, uncomplicated and natural. If it doesn't look especially Australian in these pictures, please blame only the beautiful pines.

20 - 23.

HOUSE AT COLLAROY, N.S.W., by Ancher, Mortlock and Murray.

Dark timber, sunny north terrace, shaded internal court, a plan most sympathetic to family living, a general air of relaxation, ease and unpretentious comfort - all these



architectural qualities would make this little house a classic example of the new Australian architecture even without that magnificent piece of packaged outback in the courtyard.

24, 25.

OFFICE IN NORTH SYDNEY by McCauley, Conron and Associates.

The materials used in this small professional office block for the architects own use were, naturally enough, very carefully selected: specially baked off-white bricks, dark oiled timber, white unglazed floor tiles, wood-shaving ceilings, and so on. And these were very carefully composed in rectangular counter-balancing planes and spaces. Nevertheless a logical discipline keeps the whole thing under control and prevents it from becoming precious.

26.

COMMONWEALTH GAMES BUILDING AT PERTH, by Cameron, Chisholm and Nicol.

This temporary administration building for the Commonwealth Games, held late in 1962, celebrated the new architecture in a structure with the athlete's qualities of spareness, self-denial and self-discipline.

27.

THE GAMES SUPERMARKET AT PERTH, by Cameron, Chisholm and Nicol.



27. (cont'd.)

A type of building which is normally beaten only by bowling alleys and motels in the violence of its attacks on the potential customer's eye, the supermarket is here conceived as a building rather than as an advertisement. The plan is symmetrical and orderly. The roof structure of deep, tidily boxed beams is permitted to be the one and only visual theme. Thanks to this the whole is bound together, in architectural terms, as tightly as a Scotch-taped packet on one of the neat rows of counters.

28, 29.

COMMUNITY KINDEGARTEN AT ST. IVES, N.S.W., by Collard, Clarke and Jackson.

A charming innocence that is wholly suitable to the function pervades this rather perfect little pavilion with its exactly square plan, wide verandah, and pyramidal roof.

30 - 32.

BEATTY PARK POOL KIOSK AT PERTH, by Howlett and Bailey.

This low-budget structure for the Perth City Council had to house a public kiosk for the use of bathers and a private house for the pool manager. Both occupancies demanded reasonably secluded outdoor spaces as well. The way the architects blended this mixture of public and private,



30 - 32 (cont'd.)

indoor and outdoor, areas into a single concept is delightfully simple. It was done with boldly curved sweeps of concrete block fencing, sloping from low to high to provide the desired degrees of privacy, while the building itself was restricted to an economical rectangle in the centre, under a sensible unifying wing of flat roof.

33 - 36.

THE FAIRFAX HOUSE AT NORTHBRIDGE, N.S.W., by Geoffrey Twibill.

This house in a forest of gums on steep ground is distinguished by an imaginative play with levels. One enters from below under the main block, which is perched high overhead to catch the sun and view, and climbs to an internal courtyard at Level No. 1. From this a short stair rises to the verandah and main living Level (No. 2.) Back along an ingenious passage that doubles as a breakfast bar, one climbs again to the childrens bedrooms (No. 3.) and upper street garage level (No. 4). A playroom at a lower level (No. 5.) is reached by way of a circular stair dropping from the childrens' hall.

37 - 41.

HOUSE AT CLONTARF, N.S.W., by Duffield Young Associates.

This light and charming house uses well two elements which are practically symbols of the new architecture: Firstly, a



37 - 41. (cont'd.)

verandah - now fully restored to its rightful place in Australian homes after half a century's banishment.

Secondly, a courtyard; note the play of enclosed, open, and semi-enclosed spaces in the picture at left: a vista from verandah, through livingroom, through court, to the main bedroom.