

## THE DEAD END OF MODERN ARCHITECTURE

2.

The new skyscrapers that are transforming Australian cities, re-drawing the skylines that were so recently low and prickly with spires, fall into two categories. They are Development buildings or Name buildings.

A Development building, being created only for the purpose of producing the highest possible return for the investment, is not expected to be much more than a big box with holes in it. A Name building, being erected by a government department or by a big company wholly or partly for the use of its own staff, including its most exalted executives, is expected to generate some prestige and can be forgiven a lower rate of return on investment. Thus a Named big box is expected to be more interesting, one way or another.

An example of the former is the Kingsgate development, on the dominating hill at the Kings Cross end of William Street, Sydney. An example of the latter is the half-completed B. H. P. building on the dominating hill of William Street, Melbourne; with its framework sheathed meticulously in B. H. P's own product. (Of course there are exceptions – notably Australia Square, which was a Development building intended to exude prestige and thus was transformed into a Name building.)

Diagonally opposite the B. H. P. , but a couple of doors further down at 570 Bourke Street, there is another example of a Development building. It is named Marland House, and it is really the best example of its category in all Australia. The reason I did not mention it first is that, although it is the tallest completed building in Melbourne, being topped only by the B. H. P. , very few people would know what I was referring to. Surprisingly few people – that is, Melbourne people, who see its cream-tiled bulk standing there – have actually taken any notice of it.

Now, Marland House, this exemplar of anonymity in Development building, has spent a large sum of money in holding a sculpture competition: \$25,000 for the commission and \$750 to each of 35 competitors. The selected piece is to ornament the paved square in front of the building, the paved square being of course a part of the building's compulsory gift to the city in return for the privilege of rising to 32 storeys.

This is surely a Good Thing for Australian Culture, is it not? Uniting two arts, bringing sculpture to the people, giving a fillip to the sculptors — all that sort of thing?

Well, I know that some sculptors are not convinced about that. They are glad to see sculpture being used, and glad to see some sculptors getting a slice of icing from the Development cake, but they wonder if the fine, free art of sculpture can be exercised fully in the circumscribed conditions attached to the building. They wonder if there might not have been better ways to use the money that was spent on paying and transporting so many competitors, and on all the associated ceremony: Perhaps the direct purchase of some piece of appropriate sculpture that had already been planned in the freer atmosphere of a sculptor's studio.

However, the winning piece, by Ken Reinhard of Sydney, was selected by a distinguished panel and there is every reason to expect an exciting piece of public sculpture to stand in the court in due course. At present a wooden mock-up of the five five-ft. perspex cubes, which are the basis of Reinhard's design, stand in the court to test the scale.

Yet, on the architectural side, the whole concept of the sculptural competition in relation to the building marks the end of a road: the dead end of what was once called Modern Architecture. The movement with that name had a primary aim on which all protagonists agreed. The aim was to clear away all the distortion and meaningless decoration that clung to building. (I hope this isn't too tedious). Then it had a secondary aim: to create something new with the clean, uncomplicated building materials that were left. In this creative realm there was much disagreement, and still is, some architects arguing against the very idea of a secondary aim, arguing that cleanness and uncomplication were ends in themselves.

And, while the fight was on, those virtuous qualities probably were enough in themselves. But today to be merely clean is to bore everyone to tears, so that some people turn to period revivals and others pile on "contemporary" plush, while a few remaining serious architects try to press on with the casue of creative architecture, as they see it, be they motivated by poetic visions or by computers.

In any case, all architecture today that can be called in the least creative is so far from being merely clean and uncomplicated that it can no longer be classed with buildings which have no other aim.

Marland House had no aim other than to be clean and uncomplicated. It readily admitted that when it held the sculpture competition — as if it felt that perhaps it had gone too far, was too clean and too uncomplicated. That's not to say that it is a bad building. It would be infinitely worse if it had tried to add more interest by introducing more kinds of facing tiles (there are two already) and more touches of contemporary complication, like enlarging the rounded corners that have been given to the ground floor openings into false arches. To the extent that it was built extremely cheaply and thereby will serve its Developer a maximum return — while still leaving a bit over for a sculpture competition — to this extent it is a good building.

But to build something so ordinary that it was clearly essential for something else to be added is to celebrate the discovery of the end of the road of the art that we once knew as Modern Architecture.

However, before all activity ceases on the road there are bound to be many more Development buildings which will be just as ordinary, no more creative than Marland House -- and will lack even its sculpture.