ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

A NEW PHASE IN CANBERRA

ARCHITECTURE
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CANBERRA IS entering its third phase. The year of 1971 will be noted by the architectural historian of the future, if there is one (one architectural historian, I mean), as the year the national capital first took the design lead from the State capitals.

In the long and sometimes distressing story of Canberra's growth to urban maturity, one very important phase was political. The city had to win acceptance as a capital, not just by the politicians who meet there but by the whole of the Australian public.

Another early phase was concerned with the essential transformation of the landscape.

Which of those two phases came first is hard to say. If Australians had not become a little less parochial in the last decade or so, no city, however splendid, would be accepted now as a national capital. On the other hand, if the area selected for the capital city still looked roughly as it did when it was selected, except for being scattered with petrol stations, motels, signs, and multi-colored villas, it could win recognition as a symbol of the nation. And I think Canberra has now just about won that popular symbolic recognition.

Native and exotic

What is remarkable is that this has been achieved almost without architecture. An extraordinary man-made landscape has been created in the dry yellow-ochre valleys. Landscape has always been Canberra's strength, for trees are far less controversial than buildings, or even roads. Almost from the beginning imaginative consultants like Professor Lindsay Pryor have been on hand to direct the planting of native and exotic trees; flowering, shading, decorating in brilliant contrasts of blossoms and deciduous and evergreen colors.

The climactic landscaping event was, as we all know, the creation of Lake Burley Griffin, which gave a heart to the scattered village elements; but that was not the end of it. Next a great fountain spouted out of the lake, adding the world's highest hydraulic exclamation mark to waken any visitor who had failed to notice the big pool.

Finally, in the matter of the most functional and essential element of urban landscaping—road-making—Canberra celebrated its lead recently with the opening of Capital Circle, the new ring road around Capital Hill. Now one may drive on superlative divided highways almost from one end of the city to the other. Moreover, the Griffin-derived pattern of circles and hexagons is almost complete, and the view from a regular passenger plane resembles at last the familiar paper plan.

So a city has grown out of landscaping, including splendid roads, but practically no architecture. That's to say, despite the desperate efforts of the tourist guides to whip up interest in the buildings, and with the exception of two or three acceptable monuments and some funny embassies, Canberra's buildings to date hardly offer a gourmet feast to the architecture fancier. But now the third phase, just beginning, promises to correct the balance.

The new era of Canberra architecture promises a bigness, a self-assurance in scale and concept, to match the vision of an artificial capital and the boldness of the landscape works. It is thus in contrast to the earlier tendency to smallish, scattered public buildings. It is represented by five or six major government buildings which were lucky enough to be under way before the economy receded.

The one furthest ahead is a Defence Department office building called Campbell Park. In its final form it will consist of six bulky, long office blocks, connected by knuckle joints which carry the lifts and other services and permit the design to bend. Bending lets it conform to the contours of its hillside site where it will lie like a gigantic train without a railway.

Sheer bulk

Even one section of the articulated whole is immense. It dwarfs the visitor by its sheer bulk. It is magnificent and oppressive at the same time, which is surely most appropriate to its function. The great strength of character derives largely from the device of off-setting the upper floors, so that on the entrance side their massive concrete is suspended high over one's head.

The architects are those of the Department of Works, and they have excelled themselves. Structural form as strong as this demands forthright simplicity and confidence in the details, and the building has been given those qualities, which are not as easily achieved as you might think.

It must be admitted that Campbell Park is highly eclectic. The offset floor device was re-introduced to architecture in the mid 60s by an architecturally famous building at Toronto: Scarborough College, designed by the Australian John Andrews.

Also, the treatment of the concrete in the Campbell Park building is a direct lift from another renowned building of the 1960s: the Arts and Architecture building at Yale University, by Paul Rudolph. The treatment — since pinched by numerous architects all over the world, but not seen here before — consists of pouring the concrete against ribbed formwork and then, when it has set, chipping away the ribs at random with a hammer and chisel. It is called facetiously "knitted concrete" because it looks rather like the texture of a nobbly sweater.

The other buildings of the new phase share or even exceed Campbell Park's giant scale. There are two huge government office blocks which will be prominent elements of Belconnen, the new satellite city north-west of Canberra's civic centre.

One of these, now under construction, also uses the offset floor device, but since its architect is the same John Andrews who designed Scarborough College in Toronto it can hardly be called a pinch. Both this and the other block, by McConnel, Smith and Johnson, are low, walk-up blocks covering acres of ground but perforated by a pattern of open courtyards.

Others of the new phase include the big Trade Department complex near Parliament House, designed by Harry Seidler and soon to start. It again is a low building, contrary to commercial office practice, with busy multi-purpose courtyards.

Bracing climate

Finally, for the moment, there is the National Gallery, by Edwards, Madigan and Torzillo; still in the early stages of drawing.

None of these buildings is so important as the fact that they are all coming along more or less together, and promise in some two or three years from now an infinitely more bracing architectural climate in Canberra. And such a change was desperately needed to set the stage in good time for the building on which the symbolic imagery of the capital ultimately will depend: a permanent Parliament House.