

# A SECOND FORCE AT WORK

ONCE AUSTRALIA was so isolated from contact with world architectural thought that we had a real chance to produce some architectural thinking of our own.

That was an intolerable situation. We escaped from it about 10 years ago by breaking down the isolation. Gradually more and more architects of world fame began visiting and talking to us.

Before 1954, when the great father figure of modern architecture, Walter Gropius, accepted an invitation from the architects of Sydney to speak here, not a single architect of international renown had ever visited Australia. Now hardly a week passes without a visit from one.

Some come at the bidding of rich Australian companies to design buildings here. Some are invited to attend conventions or other meetings. A few buy their own tickets. Nearly all come from America.

Largely because of this, Australian architecture is not eclectic any more; it is just American. Not merely Americanised; it is for all practical purposes truly American — that is, American in taste, in character, in the special artificial quality of the surroundings it creates (environment, I should say).

As far as Australia is concerned the only modern architecture in the world is modern American architecture. Australian clients expect it. Australian architects know how to give it. Yet meanwhile most of the rest of the world out there is going on designing in its own various regional ways.

American style is unquestionably the new international style for routine commercial buildings; but Japan, Sweden, Italy and many other countries perform, apart from that, enough individual and original architecture to constitute, taken together, a second force at work.

Second force architecture can easily be distinguished from the characteristic American kind. It

## ARCHITECTURE

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looks like buildings.

The American kind which we admire so much often takes a shape reminiscent of something else, a cigar or a ship perhaps; or it is just a box — but a gift box, excitingly clearly containing something else; though the wrapping is so beautifully done in gleaming materials that one is satisfied without looking inside.

What does the second force look like, and think about? A spokesman will be here to talk to us about it next month. He is a star architect of Europe from the star architectural country of Europe, which is of course Italy. Giancarlo De Carlo lives, practises and professes architecture in Milan. He is also a visiting professor at two American universities: Yale and MIT. He has written numerous critical books and articles and has received all the available awards.

## Gleaming

De Carlo is coming to Australia at the invitation of the Victorian Chapter of the RIAA to be the third speaker in a series of annual orations given by renowned architectural writers of the world.

In 1966, J. M. Richards, of London, launched the series. Richards is the editor of the most distinguished architectural magazine of all: The Architectural Review. He wrote the Definitive Introduction to Modern Architecture, and has been the architectural critic of The Times and of the BBC. He spoke first of the early days of the modern movement, of when the fight came to Britain. And what a clean, simple idealist fight it was, with all the functionalist pioneers — Rich-

ards was one of them — united against the romantic revivalists!

Those were the heydays of the international style. Modern architecture was an esoteric world club, not unlike the Fabians in politics. Modern architects wanted to lift the underdogs of culture up to their own high level of taste so that they too could enjoy it, or else. In much of the world today that ancient order still more or less obtains. In other words, architecture is considered to be an educated medium, something akin to literature or law, which is not expected to be understood instantly by everyone whether they are interested in it or not. It is an acquired taste. To encourage it is to improve society.

Nothing points up more the divergence of American theory from that international school of thought than the phenomenon of pop architecture.

For many years commercial American architecture has catered to what it imagined to be the lowest common denominator of popular taste. That is where we too now stand or run, trying to keep up.

But lately the U.S. has taken a giant intellectual stride ahead of everyone who thought that all that shiny chrome and grillework was a bit dull, corny and vulgar. America invented the "pop" concept, which gave a rational cultural foundation to anything which enough people liked the look of. Thus, a man named Robert Venturi has become one of the big names of U.S. architecture by eloquent advocacy of false-fronts, jazzy, "dumb" buildings: the most ordinary, uninteresting buildings; the visual Muzak of the man-made environment.

This phenomenon occupied about a third of the paper which was given by the speaker who followed J. M. Richards at the Melbourne series of orations. The second speaker was Peter Blake, of New York, something like an opposite

number of Richards across the Atlantic. He is editor of the magazine Architectural Forum, as well as a successful architect. He lives and practises in New York and he loves his American scene, but he is quite worldly-wise enough to see certain flaws in the American logic.

"I respect it," Blake said in Melbourne about Venturi's existentialist architecture. "I recognize it for the enormous force it is or will be." But the real difference, he said, between this pop architecture and the pop art which has gained respectability in the art gallery is that the pop paintings are detached from their context and "become a form of social criticism; whereas pop architecture merges with or melts into a deplorable social situation, and implies acceptance."

## Traumas

J. M. Richards' paper (A Critic's View) and Peter Blake's (The New Forces) have now been published with loads of the original illustrations and are available from the Victorian Chapter of the RIAA (616 St. Kilda Road, Melbourne, 3004) for \$1.20 each. Separately or together they give an eminently readable account of the trials of modern architecture in its youth and the traumas in its middle age.

Neither Richards nor Blake is content just to restate a story. Both have ideas about what architecture should do now to get out of a mess that it is in. These papers by two of the world's most experienced architectural writers are highly recommended to every citizen seeking a better understanding of the problems of the visual environment, and are essential background knowledge before the subject gets more complex for us by the introduction of the European element, the second force, next month when Giancarlo De Carlo gives the third paper in this series, or serial.