

## THE NEW STRENGTH IN AUSTRALIAN ARCHITECTURE

Delegates to the architectural convention in Melbourne this week will be discussing - among other subjects relative to urban redevelopment - the mess, the untidiness, the ugliness that has accompanied the modern surge of building.

If one were to paint an accurate, complete portrait of the newer developments in and around our cities putting in the warts and all, the result would not be very pretty.

Looked at as a whole, through the spiders' webs of wires, between the violent advertising constructions, our cities present some good parts but many more vast expanses of architectural wasteland. The best that can be said is that most new countries, as well as the U.S.A. and the United Kingdom, are little if any better.

But the occasion of an architectural convention is also a time for looking past the mess, the destructive or negative side of urban design, and for examining the positive or creative aspects. A small proportion - far smaller than most people imagine - of all the construction we see is designed by architects, and many of these architects' clients would be pleased to see something recognizable as good architecture emerge from their mutual enterprise. In this category of creative building work, how do we stand today? And is that long-awaited national style coming any closer?

There have been, I think, important changes in Australian architecture in the past ten years - the ten years of the Australian industrial revolution and what has been called the cultural breakthrough. To appreciate them we should remember what it was like ten years ago.

Hard as it is to believe now, only ten years ago modern architecture was an exception, a novelty, and hardly recognizable to most men in the street.

There was just one glass box in Melbourne: Equitable Chambers in Collins Street, known to everyone than as "the glasshouse". There were no skyscrapers; I.C.I. House had not yet broken through the 132 -feet height limit which had cramped Melbourne's skyline since 1886. It was then still possible to have such stylistic anomalies as a scientific research building with a Georgian Facade. In the suburbs the "contemporary" house had barely made an appearance at the popular level and, if you can credit it, cream and green was still a favorite colour scheme and vivid contemporary colours were not to be seen away from St.Kilda beach.

But at the same time modern architecture was, of course, no novelty to the Australian architectural profession. It was the established professional style of the day.

It was preached in the schools and it was practised to the best of his ability by nearly every architect, young or old.

And the Australian movement was led indisputably by Melbourne. This may be contested by some of our interstate visitors, but I think it is true. From very early in the twentieth century Melbourne was the only Australian city to have any experience of the new architecture, tentative though it was in the work of Robert Haddon, Harold Desbrowe Annear, Keith Cheetham and others.

Then Melbourne saw most of Walter Burley Griffin. And just about the time of his death, when the tentative and individual efforts became a solid movement here in the mid-'thirties, Australian modern architecture was Melbourne's exclusively. There was virtually none elsewhere.

As recently as ten years ago Melbourne's early lead still clearly showed. There were isolated phenomena in other states, like the explosive effect that Harry Seidler had on Sydney's architectural development in the early 'fifties. Nevertheless a far larger and more consistent body of architects of kindred design spirit worked in Melbourne than in any other part of this country.

The first of the three important changes in Australian architecture during the past ten years or so is rather painful for a Melburnian to have to admit. It is the loss of this supremacy by our city. But happily this does not necessarily mean that Melbourne architecture has declined. On the contrary, the best work in most of the other capital cities has more than caught up. It has become much more interesting, vital and stimulating. For instance, the most rabid architectural advocate of Melbourne would have to admit that a Sydney school of domestic architecture which has developed in the last five years or so has no parallel movement of equivalent vitality in Melbourne. Perth has seen remarkable development, not only in town-planning, in which field it leads all state capitals, but in vigorous building design as well. The growth of Canberra in the same period also has assisted in spreading the word wide across the land.

The second important change in the last ten years is subtler. Architecture has grown greatly in strength. I do not mean only the strength of unity or the literal strength of some of the rugged naked concrete work being done in Perth. There is the strength of confidence and the feeling of a determination to build well and truly. The tentative, diplomatic modern architecture of some ten years ago is beginning to make challenging statements,

The third change follows from the second. Greater confidence is followed by more experimentation and individual expression. Ten years ago the term modern architecture could be used in the stylistic sense, as I have been using it, because it had a fairly precise visual meaning. It evoked an image of a white, plain, glassy box. Today it evokes a hundred images and thus no image. It is a clean, sharp glass box but also a wandering composition of clinker bricks and rough timbers. It is naked, coarse concrete but also polished aluminium fitted to marble with minute tolerances.

In these days of reawakened Australian nationalism it would be timely to find tangled somewhere among these contrasts an evolving Australian style of architecture. I don't think it can be found, but no worry.

I think we can put away thoughts of any National Style for yet another generation. But meanwhile we can appreciate the greatest surge of originality in design for nearly a century, and can take pleasure in watching something that may turn out to be an Australian Style grow through its adolescence.

#### ILLUSTRATION CAPTIONS:

1. The strength of timber: rugged trusses and a straw ceiling above the upstairs diningroom at Adelaide's Arkaba restaurant by architects *Dickson & Platten*.

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2. Rough bricks and playful spaces, typical of the new school of Sydney domestic architecture: the courtyard of a house in Wahroonga by Allen, Jack and Cottier.
3. Strong shapes and bronze sunshades: the first building in Sydney's big Australia Square project, by Harry Seidler.
4. Raw concrete and deep shade: Mosman School for the deaf, West Australia by F.G.B. Hawkins & Sands, architects.