

Imported article

sense of direction in society there can hardly be even the prospect of maturity.

At the best there can be isolated efforts while the nation itself retains an essentially amateur attitude, relieving itself from the ultimate responsibility of civilizing the country.

It is now being proved that an Australian-made television programme can be a success — provided the hero is a cop or a cowboy and the plot follows the Hollywood Detective or Western formula down to the number of beatings-up acceptable between commercial breaks. Recently a commercial television drama was advertised in the papers with this enticing announcement: "Tonight's episode is so good you won't believe it was made in Australia."

Woe betide any really original, challenging local idea trying to break unfamiliar ground — in television, or teaching, or the arts, or the styling of packages, houses and cars. Of course there are exceptions; but you could not call these healthy days for brave new ideas. What we need now as much as in Stephensen's day, 35 years ago, is mutual confidence in the field of creative thinking, so that an Australian product could be permitted to cut through the established formulas in the same way as a European or an American idea is free to create new standards and to be considered on its own original merits. Then we would start growing up as a nation.

To achieve this mutual confidence we need, of course, a flow of clearer original thinking, here and now, in the sciences as well as in the arts. But here is a vicious circle; for confidence can grow only on evidence, and to produce evidence Australia's creative workers need the opportunities which can come their way only after they have established confidence. That condition applies to films,

television, theatre, music, sculpture, architecture and any other activity which requires a patron or proprietor to supply the opportunity. It applies less to painting. With a very small outlay on masonite and paints an artist can work, whether or not anyone buys his paintings. He can do signwriting or labouring during the day for a living. That is precisely what the more imaginative Australian painters of the 1940s and '50s did, and they gradually built up the evidence, which created confidence and patronage and more evidence, so that today they are the brightest jewels in Australia's cultural Kelly crown (and are mostly living in London).

Now if you have, perhaps, been considering that up to this point I have been talking rot, or at best loose generalities, and mostly about subjects in which I am highly inexperienced, forgive me if I now get down to detail. I will focus now on my own ~~subject and be more specific.~~ Architecture is of course a sad art these days, the mother art sullied by commercial exploitation and gone seedy. Yet it is still the most painfully obvious art of any society and still, as in ancient Egypt or Greece, it provides, better than any other evidence, an index to the standards and aspirations of the people who build it.

I am of the opinion that every community, now as in the past, goes through four stages in its architectural development from cradle to castle, or cottage to cultural centre. The first is domestic primitive; that is: homespun or do-it-yourself design. In Australia's case that stage spans the enormous range between a colonial homestead and a modern motel or any other building of today that has its sights fixed no higher than profit. The second is imported sophisticated; that is the period when some richer promoters want their buildings to stand out from the

rest, but don't have the patience nor the taste to search for the ^{better} ~~special~~ quality at ^{home,} ~~home,~~ and do have the money to buy it abroad. The third stage is when building promoters begin to look for similar ^{higher} qualities at home. We may call ^{that} ~~it~~ the domestic sophisticated stage. And the fourth stage is when the community reaches full maturity and looks for the best architecture it can get, not caring whether the architect be local or imported. This may be called the international and ultimate stage.

At the time when Canada was undergoing forced-feeding of culture in the early days of the Canada Council, throughout the 1950s and early '60s, one could say that it was at the second stage. It was as affluent as could be, and as unsure of itself as only the newly-rich can be. It was building furiously: freeways on the surface, skyscrapers measured in superlatives (Place Victoria, Montreal; the world's highest reinforced-concrete building) and underground, great complexes of shopping subways and railways. And all the important buildings had foreign architects: Italian in one case, but mostly from across the border in the USA.

Then the accumulated influence of the Canada Council and Expo 67 and the new mood of self-reliance edged its way through to the level of building promotion and quite suddenly Canada shipped into Stage Three. She began using her own architects for the big works. Thus she began contributing to the international advance of architecture, and now if she chooses to invite an American or other foreign architect back to design a building it will be on different terms; it will be on the fourth level. The USA itself frequently enough invites foreign architects. ~~The USA itself frequently enough invites foreign architects.~~ Harvard has a Le Corbusier building, the only one in the USA. Harvard invited the master so that it could say it had a Corbusier, just as one might claim a Picasso or a Rembrandt.

When Australian building promoters import the talents of American architects they sometimes cite America's use of foreign stars like Le Corbusier and Alvar Aalto to justify their own action, but the motives in each case are entirely different. America, having fully established its own position as a leading contributor to world culture, moved some time ago to stage four, from which it is at liberty to survey the world and pick what suits it best. Australia's importation of architectural services is on the level of stage two. The architects being imported are not the Le Corbusiers and Alvar Aaltos, but the architects who have demonstrated in New York, Los Angeles or London, that they can exploit most subtly the building regulations and the computer and ^{the} techniques of office management to provide the highest possible return from behind the neatest possible facade.

It is difficult for an architect to give examples in an argument of this sort, because his motives and attitudes may be suspect. But I could mention a few cases in Melbourne. On the corner of Bourke and William Street, the mammoth American firm of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill built Shell House on the northwest corner, and designed the AMP and St. James' building on the southwest corner, and have a finger in the BHP building on the southeast corner. In Collins Street, on the most prominent site of all Melbourne — beside the Civic Square, opposite the Town Hall — a huge new building almost certainly will be by a London architect. Higher up, the big block which includes the Oriental Hotel is to be rebuilt by ^{the} ANZ bank, and Mainline of Sydney, using the American architect I. M. Pei. If you add to these the prominent American buildings already here, like the Southern Cross and Chadstone Shopping Centre, the sum is a sizable influence. In Sydney an almost equal sum is being built up. But not in Brisbane

or Hobart or Adelaide. They are still at stage one. Melbourne and Sydney are at stage two: like Singapore, Ghana, and a number of other emerging countries which also use the talents of I. M. Pei and the more enterprising investment architects of London.

Please don't think that I am criticising the practice. I mention it merely to reinforce my argument that the Australian dream of an individual identity is impossible now. It might have been possible at stage one, at the homespun level. But we have passed beyond that to the inevitable if not especially admirable second stage, the stage of growing up into the world. Architecture historically has been associated with style more closely than other arts, and many still look to it to produce an Australian Style. A book of that title indeed has just been published. It is a ridiculous book, containing pictures of every ravishing style in history: Bavarian, Spanish, Finnish, French, American; as many different styles as there are pages, which is more than two hundred, and it is proof, if that is needed, of the total stylistic confusion in which we grope at present.

We cannot go back to the rustic Australiana of stage one. We can only press on as fast as possible to stage three, and hope that stage four is not too far behind. Stage three (I should like to recall) is when a nation grows out of the practice of buying imported talent as a means of improving itself, and begins producing her own sophistication, her own contributions to the international development. This stage can be brought closer by criticism, discussion, and education. Australians can be taught to look at Australian things more critically and more encouragingly. Australians at the managerial and promotional level can be encouraged to have more confidence in Australian artists of all kinds; and Australian artists of all kinds can

be encouraged to have more confidence in themselves. We all must be prepared for experimental failures in order to build more successes. We must be prepared for our creative people to shock us by pursuing unrecognizable ideas, to be themselves; individual, original and genuine. The resultant conflict may have nothing to do with Australian identity but it will be an Australian contribution to world civilization, and that is all that matters.

And now to return to architecture and to end on a more optimistic note: there is in Australia a place where the third stage is closer than you may think. That is Canberra. Our capital has passed through the architectural stages like a runaway train.

In the 1950s it was still at stage one: domestic primitive. This applied to the smallest and largest buildings in its programme. An extraordinary charade of primitively copied architectural costumes built up, with almost every style in the world's history represented — including some genuine local expressions, but those were suffocated in the crowd.

In the 1960s it moved to stage two: imported sophisticated. Oh! The number of Overseas Experts who lodged profitably for a few nights or weeks at our capital: peers from England and technological masters from America! Lord Holford designed the bridges and much else. Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (again) designed the defence centre, the Russell Offices. John Andrews was brought out from Canada to do a huge office complex for the new town centre of Belconnen, north west of Canberra City.

Now, that is an important point. For John Andrews was and is Australian. He is a very fine architect and was a prominent element of our brain drain. He practiced in Toronto, but was invited as a stage four exercise by the USA to do some big buildings there — including one of the most exalted prestige: the design school at Harvard. Canberra — that is, the National Capital Development Commission — brought him back to Australia. He planned a fine building for Belconnen, which is just now starting in construction. Somehow it broke the barrier out of stage two. Now half a dozen huge, important buildings on the drawing boards for Canberra are being done by some of our most imaginative architects who, less than ten years ago, were building houses in Sydney or Melbourne and looked at stage two Canberra as tourists in a foreign city. But Canberra is now in stage three; it is in the world of creative architecture at last. And all the rest of Australia can be. And when Australia is really a creative element in the modern world we may suddenly recognize that we have grown, unnoticed, a national identity after all.