# ARCHITECTURE

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Three national influences have acted on Australian architecture. One is the English tradition, which was the fountainhead of nearly all building ideas through the nineteenth century. Another is the more recent influence of the U.S.A., which may be subdivided into two kinds: Hollywood and serious. Thirdly, there is the complicated set of indigenous influences, ranging from the native materials to the psychology of isolation. These influences were represented by three men, all now dead, who struggled to bring modern architecture to life about the time of the first world war.

Firstly, the Englishman, Robert Haddon, a Romantic-functionalist inheriting a little from Morris and Mackintosh: a scholastic man, fond of his new land but always nostalgic for the Old Country.

Secondly, an original member of the Chicago School - and one of the last of them - the American, Walter Burley Griffin, radiating gentle warmth, organic theory and democratic New World idealism.

Thirdly, the Australian, Harold Desbrowe Annear, who was born in Ballarat in 1866 when it was still hardly more than a gold-rush canvas town. Annear never left Australia. He was impatient with such tuition as he could get in Melbourne. He was an experimenter, improviser, inventor of architectural gadgetry. He was self-confident and rebellious. He ridiculed "good taste" and traditions, preferring what he imagined were his own answers, whatever their faults. He was inconsistent, unstable and not altogether reliable, but among his best works are some which deserve passing recognition alongside the earliest European and Chicagoean pioneers of the modern movement. (Not that Annear, working in isolation from hearsay and first principles, would

have known the others' names or expected recognition outside the smarter streets of Toorak or Portsea where he worked).

The antipodean isolation has since been modified by radio and jets, but still the three elements are to be found separately, each in a fairly pure state. The Old World is now represented architecturally by a persistent, if slowly shrinking, streak of conservatism that diverts attention from form to detail. The results of this are never exactly academic, but on the other hand not quite as dowdy as Europe at her stodgiest. The New World is represented by a more than usually hysterical worship of the American image: we might call it "Austericanism". This leads to violent primary-hued delinquency - not clever enough to be fashionably smart but on the other hand never quite as mad as Miami. The physical isolation of Australia from her spiritual sisters of the West is not in fact felt strongly enough to be valuable. It is not sharp enough to free architects to work out their own solutions. The oceans have worked as a valve permitting only a one-way passage of ideas: inwards always from the higher-pressure areas, continuously inflating feelings of inadequacy or frustration among the local practitioners of all arts. The supremacy of the importation is a popular concept against which the Annear spirit of indiscipline has rebelled at intervals and has produced one vital strain of modern Australian building.

But the average unintrospective Australian architect and his client are not, of course, disturbed by the action of the valve. There is no serious suggestion of aggressive artistic nationalism. Any Australian flavour in everyday building appears to be involuntary, in

some obvious ways related to the qualities which visitors usually discover in the Australian human character. He is (observers often say) easy-going to an extent which exasperates urgent North Americans and exact Central Europeans. "Near enough" is the national philosophy: a deliberate cult of anti-finesse, of outbackmanship. But (they admit) he answers up to challenges. He is resourceful, an ingenious improviser, a born mechanic, the sort of fellow you like to have close by in an emergency. These qualities colour to some extent all the styles of Australian building. They help to produce a background that is practical, unstylish, technically advanced, casual in detail and often hideously garish. And they produce the opposite: buildings that recognize the existence of a challenge, of an artistic emergency for a rich and lazy young nation which could quite easily be swamped entirely by imported mass-produced ideas.

Sensitive Australian laymen, aware of this general danger and searching architecture for a "National Style", look hopefully to the colonial building of the early nineteenth century. Here was a displaced, delayed, diminutive Georgian with all the charm of diminution and anachronism and just enough subtle peculiarities to mark it from other and earlier Georgian work. The domestic variant was quite distinctive: a low, hipped shingle roof, later corrugated iron, pulled down all round a white house like a wide hat brim shading the long evenly-spaced windows. Australians can see - though it is less perceptible to visitors - a continuing tradition based on this relaxed and random form. The uncrowded single-storey, wide sun-shading eaves, and extroversion, combined with the peculiarities of the kiln-dried native timbers and

the cheapness of Australian steel, still produce in unselfconscious construction a sort of ~~adopted~~ indigenous character.

Australia has many things in common with Sweden and California, including a filial feeling for the twentieth century. Thus a fairly accurate idea of modern Australia may be gained by imagining an underpopulated California. It is hardly surprising that the building of both regions have been similar for more than a hundred years. The climate, colouring and social background are similar, and both discovered gold and galvanised iron about the same time. On the other hand Australia may be pictured even better by thinking of Sweden and then imagining the extreme opposite. Australian taste is all peaks and valleys. No landscapes have been outraged more wantonly than the untidy olive and ochre sites of most Australian towns. The first move of the land exploiters still is to remove all trace of native growth. Fevered advertising, frank or subconscious, almost submerges architecture in the commercial areas and every sensitive building is all but smothered by its neighbours. The one architectural vice Australia need not fear is monotony.

About five years ago Australia rose from the bed of a post-war trough suddenly to the crest of a building boom. The building industry became busier than at any time since it made the grotesque stucco palaces of the late nineteenth century. Expenditure on new building construction amounted to more than a quarter of the total investments in Australia. Lately the boom has become less exciting and more of a habit. The industry is now merely fully employed and expecting to participate with reasonable

profit in the unlimited future which Australia nowadays pictures for herself (all going well in Asia).

The new confidence has concrete foundations in big public works, the most impressive of which is the enormous project in the Snowy Mountains where coastal rivers are being diverted through the range back into the dry interior. And it is ornamented with non-utilitarian buildings, like Sydney's Opera House and Melbourne's National Art Gallery and Cultural Center. Both these are giant projects in any language. They are now under construction, but a few years ago they would have been politically impossible. Then housing took priority to everything else. With the lifting of restrictions on "non-essential" buildings, the construction of houses now has dropped slightly, but the rate is still about 95,000 dwellings per year, and the number of separate houses under construction per head of population must still be close to a world record. The shortage cannot be estimated very scientifically. It is measured not by the number of homeless but by the number wanting more comfortable homes. The popular objective is a pretty, semi-contemporary villa with venetian blinds and a lock-up garage for every family. The main obstacle to this amiable aspiration is not a shortage of builders, labour or materials, nor of money in the weekly pay envelope. It is a shortage of capital, a chronic condition of Australia. There seems no limit to the dribs of money available for non-durable goods, but continually the flow of money for building investment strikes blockages. The optimism of the country is thus better reflected in the standard of refrigerators and the thickness of

breakfast steaks than in the quality of new houses. However, the Government, the insurance companies and the banks do contribute their money to the building industry in another way: by commissioning some of the most elaborate of the new curtain-walled office blocks which are transforming the central areas of the capital cities.

The decline of housing to little more than half the total output of the building industry has re-animated the architectural profession, which was never greatly concerned with the cottages. It is not unusual for a man to be operating a satisfying little private practice five years or so after graduation. No fewer than 3,500 architects are registered in Australia. This is about 334 per million people - one of the highest proportions in the world, comparing with 76 per million in the U.S.A. Maybe this fact helps to explain (by the maxim of too many cooks) the characteristic inconstancy of Australian architecture. The drift from housing has also caused a reshuffling in the builders' ranks. The once-crowded field of "little" builders - the family teams and the random spec. builders - is thinning out. The only way to make a success of housing speculation now appears to be the big way: a hundred "young executive's villas" at a time, a package deal with finance arranged for the furniture as well, a multi-coloured marquee, and the Minister for Housing flown to the site by helicopter to launch the parade.

In bread-and-butter building-materials Australia has always been self-sufficient if not opulent. Today the production of bricks, steel, cement, terra-cotta and hardwood is steadily if unevenly on the rise,

keeping pace with the rapidly growing population. The most obvious deficiency of the land is in softwoods. For all practical purposes Australia has no native softwood. The ubiquitous eucalypt grows in hundreds of regional varieties of texture and colour, from the deep rust red of the western jarrah to the sun-bleached northern silver ash - an albino wood as light as an ocean beach. Some, like jarrah, is practically impervious to dampness and rot. Much of this is exported as railway sleepers. Other varieties, like the straight yellow mountain ash which climbs to 300-feet in the south-eastern highlands, do almost any indoor job beautifully and well: framing, flooring or furniture. All of this wood is hard, and unstable while carrying any moisture, requiring diligent kiln-drying, which was early developed in Australia. It supplies about eighty per cent of the timber requirements of the building industry. The remainder is made up of imports, mostly softwood. More than half of this is Douglas Fir (called "Oregon") from the U.S.A. and Canada. Some is "Baltic"-Scandinavian pine ready-milled into flooring and weatherboards, and some is Radiata Pine from New Zealand's plantations. About one-quarter of the timber imports, to the value of some £3,000,000 ($ 7 million) annually, is spent on figured timbers from Borneo, Malaya, New Guinea.

While the local bread and butter of building materials has been wholesome, Australia developed a habit during a century and a half before 1950 of reaching abroad for the marmalade or peanut butter. For instance, while she made her own roof tiles and floor tiles, she imported the decorative tiles for the walls from the U.K., Italy or Japan.

Since the early 'fifties a new concept of Australia as an industrial power and a factory for Asia has grown. Now there are, proportionately to population, more factory workers in Australia than in North America, and the ever-increasing load of refrigerators, power lawn-mowers, television sets, room-conditioners, and labour-saving devices which burden the working man is almost entirely made in Australia. The economy still rides on the sheep's back but exports of industrial goods, including iron and steel products, aircraft, vehicles and electrical equipment are rising continuously. Manufactured goods now amount to more than one fourth of the export trade. There is even the faintest hint of an architectural device emanating from Australia with these products. The adjustable glass-louvre window - which is one of the country's three contributions to domestic technology, along with the development of fibrous-plaster sheeting and stainless steel sinks - is being exported in sizable quantities from Queensland. Mainly these airy windows go to Asia, but others to the value of £30,000 annually are imported by the U.S.A. and double this quantity is bought by Great Britain. Galvanised iron sheeting worth some six million pounds is exported each year to New Zealand and Asia.

All the time the Australian content of building is rising. About three-fourths of all hardware, light fittings and sanitary ware used are Australian-made. The remaining fourth is welcomed for variety rather than to make up a shortage. Most of the gas and electrical stoves and virtually all refrigerators and air conditioners are made in Australia, and quantities are exported. About ninety-seven per cent of the 140,000 tons of structural steel consumed yearly by the

building industry is locally produced. The remainder is mostly giant sections which are not rolled because the manufacturers consider the demand is limited. A few prefabricated aluminium buildings are imported and about the same quantity of steel prefabs is exported. Plastics of all kinds are made and used with an enthusiasm which suggests there might be a special appeal to Australians in the smooth, cheap, intricate precision of the colorful moulded product. On the other hand, no wallpaper is printed in Australia; the little that is used comes from England or Japan. More than making up for the comparative absence of wallpaper, Australia has a rapacious appetite for paint. An annual cutput worth $70 million from the local paint industry provides millions of gallons of vividly coloured paint for use on new buildings and in gingering up old buildings with "contemporary" fashion hues.

If this suggests a rather hideous mess on the surface of modern Australia, one must admit that the suggestion is apt. Yet, of course, the vulgar colours and shapes of many busy commercial centers are not all there is to Australian architecture. Less obvious, there is a fair share of the individual soul-searching which accompanies a young nation trying earnestly to know its own mind. If the popular architectural mess is wilder than usual, so is the outcry against it. Protest and criticism is at least as lively as anywhere, and architecture is a popular art. It is popular because patronage of it is within reach of almost everyone sometime in his life, if not in his business then in the separate suburban cottage often shaped individually for him in defiance of technical advances or business efficiency.

The design of big public projects are widely discussed, architectural criticism is given space in the daily press, and the intricacies of contemporary domestic architecture are a standard butt of television comedians.

The people look to the architect for stimulation and excitement, and at the present time the architects are as uncertain as they are in any other country as to how they should respond. The younger architect still clings to the faith that there is rational justification for his modern eclecticism. He absorbs the influences of Europe and America separately through the magazines and in travel taken as soon as possible after graduation. His first trip usually takes him to Europe, concentrating on Italy, Scandinavia and Great Britain. His second trip is to the U.S.A.. He is looking for practice rather than theory, and on returning home he finds the American magazines more helpful than the English and European ones. Thus numerous curtain walls are rising in the bigger cities, twenty to thirty stories high, and as clean, conformist, non-committal and comfortable as anywhere else in the world. Then there are Australian versions of all the mid-century mannerisms, from European Brutalism to Edward Stone's grillwork, and eager young men who imitate Frank Lloyd Wright convinced that they are original, constructive humanists. There are also some quiet free-thinkers and those whose first trip overseas is to Japan and Australia's northern Asian neighbours. And there are, finally, those of the Annear spirit: the architectural bushrangers. It would be fun to think that these last are growing in number, strength and maturity, but the truth seems to be the contrary. The rebels are fading away as Australia gets

more populous, prosperous, industrialised and confident. The exciting things in Australian modern architecture were until recently isolated experiments done with little more than sticks, wires, space and unencouraged enthusiasm. But already the last continent is losing its innocence.

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