

THE ARCHITECT AND SOCIETY.

(for Walkabout)

About two hundred architects from cities all over Australia and from some others abroad are meeting now at a Convention called by the Royal Australian Institute of Architects in Melbourne - from March 29 to April 2. The subject under discussion is city redevelopment, or, as the Convention programme puts it: "Civic Architecture, the Architect and Society."

Most of our cities are rebuilding fairly frantically, but on plans set down decades before steel and concrete, airconditioning, cars, television and many other everyday facilities of our lives were known, and in days when a town of a hundred thousand people was considered a big city. Today we face the realities of a transformation in building Technology, a revolution in transport, and an explosion in city populations. Sydney and Melbourne, each over two million, are headed for populations of five million in our time, and no doubt eventually will be among the mammoth urban complexes of the world.

And how do our cities stand now in the light of these realities? How modern are our cities? Even such an apparently up-to-date object as a glassy skyscraper may be obsolete before the cement is dry if it is placed in a street of a nineteenth century plan contrary to the demands of modern transport, if it over-strains already crowded access routes, if it blocks development of parking facilities, and prohibits the introduction of green open spaces in the concrete jungles that have grown where farms and houses were planned.

Many of the exhibitions and lectures at the convention are open to the public, and while the architects are

discussion the technical problems, and some of the more discussable artistic ones, laymen may make the occasion one for considering how the record stands.

Is anything happening in architecture that remotely approaches the excitement in Australian painting, with its international reputation, or the vigour of Australian enterprises in many other fields from sport to medical research?

It doesn't take a professional eye to see that Australian building is a mixed bag - full of gaudy commercial eye-catchers, and conventional dullness, and sentimental revivals. But also every now and then there is something that looks like serious architecture. That is, the sort of building that grows from a successful partnership of an owner and an architect sharing an intention to build something more than just economic shelter. In this limited field, it can be said that Australian architecture today is developing with sensitivity and with vigour. It is less solemn but more thoughtful than it has been for perhaps a century. In evidence of this, the organisers of the architects' convention have selected for WALKABOUT this portfolio of photographs of representative recent buildings from all over Australia. It includes public and private, city and suburban, big and small buildings.

These diverse buildings have something in common; something that might be called an architectural kinship. It would be too much to say that an Australian Style has developed: such things simply don't happen any more in this modern world where airconditioning and telstars level out climate and cultures. But at least an Australian school of modern architecture is taking shape.

Its work is by no means unique. It gives hints of many outside influences. But overall its flavour is not a

conscious or obvious copy of any foreign school. It is a branch of international modern design that has grown up here during the last fifteen years or so, and during this time the younger architects have been gaining confidence and a feeling of independence. Their separate works, along with those of their older colleagues who pioneered modern architecture here in the nineteen-thirties and forties, are beginning to fall into a recognizable pattern.

This is a thoughtful architecture to the extent that a spectacular visual result does not appear to be the most pressing consideration. A fundamental sort of simplicity and an internal orderliness seem to come first. This emphasis usually results in a clean overall form in which the structural elements are so clearly displayed that the most non-technical observer can see, if he is interested, just how it is all put together and why it stands up in the wind. The open expression of the structural elements compensates for the general absence of applied colour and lack of ornament, and further compensation is provided in the textures of the materials selected.

For instance, the rich range of colours and grains in Australian timbers has been rediscovered. But they are used with restraint, for this is also an architecture of quite austere taste. It is not romantic or over elegant. It does not caricature historic architectural styles, although a faint flavour of tradition can be detected here and there. It does not lean too ostentatiously away from refinement to the brutal sense of ~~of~~ sculptural strength that often marks the contemporary reaction to effete elegance in Europe and Japan.

In all this, Australian architecture has much in common with Californian and Scandinavian, but also it has its own character and integrity. The best new Australian

buildings are rarely in the race for international architectural recognition. If they happen to impress you, it is rather by understatement and repose, and a sense of responsible design.

Australian architecture today is in the middle of the road of modern architecture, which is leading, we all hope, to a genuine and settled style of the twentieth century.