

OF FEATURES, BOOK REVIEWS AND THE ARTS

LOST CHANCE AT BRASILIA

Economy-minded Canberra spurns Australian design

THE NEW Australian Embassy to be built at Brasilia, the world's most design-conscious city, will not be designed by an Australian.

In this other Canberra, this even newer artificial capital in the highlands of Brazil, design has played an extraordinarily high diplomatic role from the beginning. The city's dashing aerodynamic plan by Lucio Costa and the bold white sculptural forms of Oscar Niemeyer's governmental buildings created a brilliant image that shone right round the world. This was just what its political promoters intended. The terms "Brasilia" and "bold designs" became practically synonymous.

Thus when the city's diplomatic colony opened there was much speculation and anticipation in architectural circles as to what the rest of the world would bring to Brasilia, in the shape of the foreign embassies. Most countries were suitably conscious of the subtleties of the situation. Britain, for instance, took a spectacular turn in policy away from its stiff-upper-lip export design, as celebrated in the British buildings in Canberra. It selected architects for its Brasilia building Peter and Alison Smithson.

Creative

The Smithsons have been the uncrowned king and queen of London's architectural bohemia since the days when long hair and sandals meant something intellectual. They have been at the centre of the cult known as "New Brutalism". In the ordinary course of events the appointment of the Smithsons for official Whitehall work would seem to be about as likely as our Government commissioning Martin Sharp for an official portrait of the Prime Minister. Nevertheless the Smithsons are recognised in Britain as being among the few original thinkers and creators in architecture in that country. Whitehall must have taken a tranquillising pill before it ap-

By ROBIN BOYD

pointed them for the job, but it did, and thus demonstrated that it could appreciate an occasion when extraordinary measures in design were called for. Undoubtedly Britain will thus add something creative and of her own to Brasilia.

Right alongside the site for the British Embassy in the international sector at Brasilia is the Australian Embassy site. And whom has the Australian Government selected to design our contribution?

A Mr Henrique J. Mindil, of Rio de Janeiro.

Mr Mindil undoubtedly will be able to fulfil the requirements of the Department of External Affairs efficiently and professionally.

He may also be a splendid designer. He is quite unknown internationally. Cross-Section, the newsletter of Melbourne University's Architecture Department, comments that he has previously designed "some rather jazzy office buildings and flash houses."

But even if we had commissioned Oscar Niemeyer himself we would still have been missing the point and the opportunity of making an original Australian contribution to this design mecca of the world.

How could we make such a mistake? Well, we were economising, no doubt. Saving travel expenses of an Australian. But Brasilia was one place where such commendable thriftiness should have been tempered with discretion. Certainly Brasilia may not be an important post to us, in the cold political sense. But the question of prestige enters; in Brasilia, as in some other capitals, design is part of politics.

Mistakes like this may con-

tinue to happen all too easily while the present Australian attitude to the design of our overseas embassies continues.

Let me not suggest that there is anything inferior about the buildings in which we are represented abroad, or that they project an unattractive reflection of Australian taste. On the contrary, the appointments generally reflect the tastes of our diplomats who have passed through. And since diplomats are cultivated, knowledgeable and never obnoxious, the results are usually notably superior, and happily leak no hint of the average taste in plastic flowers back home. But at the same time they also fall as a rule to give any impression of educated or advanced tastes back home. The interior design, furniture and furnishings are frequently bought anywhere in the fashion centres of the world except Australia. This is not a matter of policy. It is just the way things happen in the absence of a policy.

Elegant

We can be remarkably lucky sometimes. In Moscow, for instance, the Australian Embassy is one of the most elegant and distinguished smaller buildings of the city. Early in 1959, when the break in diplomatic relations between us and the Soviet was being mended, one of the conditions which was insisted upon by Lord Casey was that the Russians make available for us first-class accommodation in Moscow.

They agreed, but no-one could have anticipated the architectural bonus which they added, no doubt unwittingly. The building we occupy is a merchant's palace built about 1900. It also happens to be one of the most

remarkable examples in the world of the most esoteric of all architectural styles, the art nouveau. It is a treasure for the connoisseur, a vast and delightfully simple confection of white plaster and buried light globes.

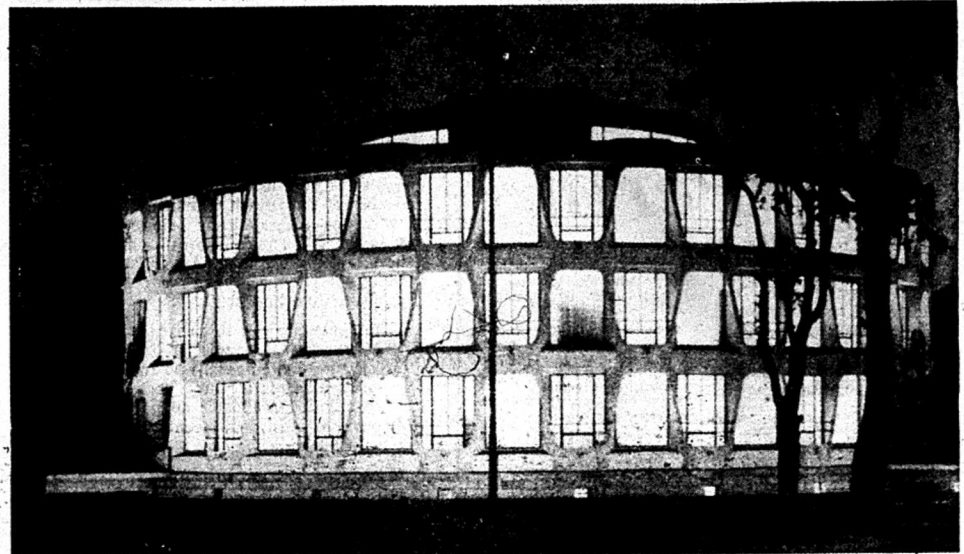
It was redecorated for us by a leading Mayfair interior decorator. He did it well. However, any of a dozen Australian decorators could have done it at least as well, and could have made it more relative to Australia.

Wandering

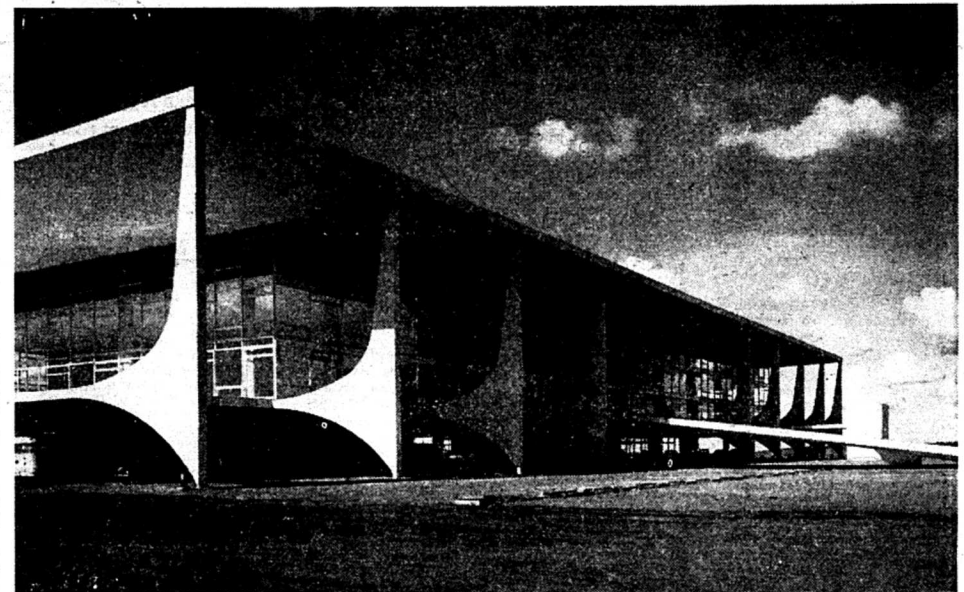
Our non-policy in diplomatic design puts us at the stage of the United States at the time it built its Little Williamsburg in Canberra. It was wandering, looking for an image, treating each building problem in each country differently according to the whim of someone in the State Department. But the mistakes became so obvious about 12 years ago that John Foster Dulles finally appointed a permanent advisory board of distinguished workers in design.

United States' embassies of brilliant design now grace many world cities. The latest is in Dublin. They are notable for reflecting the current thinking of American architects and designers while paying respect to the traditions and character of their host cities.

One hesitates to recommend yet another advisory committee in Australia, but the blow to Australian design at Brasilia suggests that we should follow this American example. A knowledgeable board to guide our foreign building programme, to protect and develop our visual character abroad, seems to be necessary.



THE FACE OF AMERICA: Latest United States embassy—in Dublin



THE FACE OF BRAZIL: Presidential executive offices in Brasilia