

WHAT DO WE WANT OF ARCHITECTURE?

Perhaps you think that's a crazy question. Only ten or fifteen years ago you would have been perfectly right in thinking it was a crazy question. Then things throughout the world were so nicely settled, except for comparative trivialities like the Cold War. But no Vietnam, no student activists, no protests, no demonstrations or drugs to speak of. Well, protesters, certainly: a few misfits and trouble-makers as always - but, underneath, a steady solid foundation of right-thinking on which practically all of us nice people could agree.

The part of that solid foundation that referred to architecture laid down a set of three rules, first specified by Vitruvius in Roman times and revised at intervals over the centuries.

Good architecture should have, the rules stated: commodity, firmness, and delight (- or usefulness, sound construction, and beauty). They seemed incontestably correct rules.

But now, in these days when everything is being questioned from the bottom up, all three of those oldtime goals of good building are being re-examined by young architects, and those who think they should think like young architects, and all three are being contradicted.

First, usefulness. How can that be questioned? Surely that must still be the first rule. What other reason can there be for building anything?

Yet it is questioned by those people I've mentioned - those people who will be designing most buildings between now and the 21st. century.

It is questioned for this reason: Usefulness for, or to, whom? In

the old days it was to be useful for the building owner only. The architect had to assist Simon Legree in extortion of the tenants and occupiers of the building; dragging out for the landlords the maximum mean usefulness from the smallest number of building pounds, or dollars. But today if a building is not useful to the occupier - that is, not functional, workable, and convenient to the tenants, then it's not much use to the owner either, for it will be empty in no time.

However, usefulness to the owner and occupier may conflict with usefulness to others - to neighbours, for instance, who suffer some inconvenience from a misplaced super-market, or to society as a whole which might suffer, for instance, a loss of identity when a new building demands the tearing down of an historic and socially significant one.

Then that question is full of meaning: useful to whom? That's when architecture strikes its first moral challenge. Should the architect serve his client dutifully and silently, tearing down history to make a better investment for the client? It's a difficult question for the individual architect to answer. He can always console himself, as he pockets the fee, that if he hadn't done it someone else would have - and at least he tore down the old building more gently than some others would have. But what do you expect of, want of, architecture in a case like that? To be an obedient professional man, or to have a social conscience? It depends, I suggest, whether you are a client or just an onlooker. You are likely to have a different answer for each case.

Then: the second quality of architecture, defined as firmness. That's where architecture comes closest to engineering. In the old days firmness meant good building, and vice versa. Today good building means much more. It involves numerous mechanical services - engineering works - of all kinds. The actual structure is becoming a smaller and smaller component of the total building, the total collection of plumbing, wiring, lifts, ducts, furnaces and compressors.

The actual structure may, indeed, eventually, disappear.

Thirty years or so ago the first wind curtains acting as doors to department stores began setting some architects' minds racing ahead to the idea of a building erected without walls, without any structure - just wind currents to divert the rain, and maybe electronic fields to divert unwanted visitors. Later, a thin inflated balloon was substituted for the wind curtains. It proved to be a lot quieter and cheaper. Inflated structures have been a reality now for years - mainly for stores, ^{— one now a Moomba pavilion.} Then at Expo 70 the US pavilion proved for the first time the practicability of a giant building being held up by nothing but air. Every eager young architect now has plans in his drawer or his mind for a blown-up building of some sort, in which airconditioning is a vastly more important element than structure. But all that is old hat now. Really progressive architects are imagining the day when imaginary architectural space will eliminate even the wind curtains or the thin plastic membranes as the dividing line between shelter and the great outdoors. They point, for example, to the flight corridors and stacking funnels over airports. These are real spaces, which surround aeroplanes almost as solidly as hangar walls but which in fact do not exist except as responses in precision instruments which control the relationship of the aircraft to the airport. There may be ways, in the distant future, for synthesizing space enclosure - providing the visual, acoustical and temperature isolation which are the only reasons for building - without any real building at all. Then the engineering content of architecture will be about 100%. Although I believe that there may still be room for a humanistic or artistic treatment of the sensed space that will be created.

In those and other ways two of the ancient rules for good building - commodity & firmness - have changed and are changing along with social and technological changes. But now I come to the real, immediate crux. The third rule. Delight, Beauty. Pleasing appearance. Aesthetic satisfaction - it has a dozen names, all misunderstood some of the time, all meaning different things to different people.

But whatever you call it, this is the real crunch in any discussion of architecture today.

When I ask what do we want of architecture, I am asking, very simply, how do "we" (i.e. society) want it to look? Because the usefulness, or the functional part, and the firmness, or the engineering part, are important only to the users, i.e. the occupiers and owners. Usefulness and firmness are tremendously important to them - but only to them. To everyone else the building is important only as an element of the visual environment.

When a city experiences a building boom such as Melbourne has been up on William Street hill, a number of buildings all conforming more or less to an agreed architectural/economic fashion combine to make a whole new visual environment. That's when the old third rule of architecture becomes important. Walking along William Street today between the bland flat cliffs of reconstructed-stone and glass and tiles, differing only in colour and nicety of detail, that's when one should ask "what do we want of architecture?"

Now, the generation gap, or cultural split, or whatever you call it, has attacked architecture as viciously as it has the administration of any university. If you happen to hear architects arguing these days, or sense an argument in some discussion on building which you may read in the press, what it is all about is this:

On the one hand there are the square older architects who build in the tradition. Not in the traditional styles - classic or Spanish, etc. - but in the tradition which considers every building to be a monument of some sort: a 3D work of art (incorporating, of course, commodity & firmness, or it would be sculpture and not architecture) but still a work involving ^{controlled} human imagination and ^{a sense of design and order} ~~invention and sensitivity~~ ^{responding to known} human needs. The very squarest of the older architects may even add the word taste, yet that word is pretty suspect so it's rarely heard these days.

Anyway, the monumental tradition of the older architects' approach covers a vast range of modern buildings; from our ambitious Victorian Arts Centre and Canberra's National Library - to the bland, bald, boxy skyscrapers of millionaires' hill - to the earthy, naked, fractured concrete of some of the younger architects' works which you may have noticed lately coming slowly into favour: Borland & Jackson's Malvern Baths, for instance, or Graeme Gunn's union building beside the Trades Hall.

But there is an opposition to the whole of that huge range of visual statements. The opposition classes all that in some such words as "the high culture of the elite" - some more elite than others. This opposition is made up, as I've said, of those who may be doing most of the designing of most of the buildings in the last part of the 20th. century: i.e. the rebel students and the untried graduates of today. They class all that kind of architecture as dead, or if not dead yet they are going to try to kill it. One of their spiritual leaders, a sort of Black Panther of architecture named Cedric Price, says: "I consider it unlikely that architecture and planning will match the contribution that Hush Puppies have made to society today." In short, they think that "establishment" architects are still living in an ivory tower, performing works of art, or taste (like the Arts Centre, or the Plumbers' Union building) which are utterly remote from what The People really want.

And what is it that the The People really want, in the rebels' opinion? Their suggestions take different forms, but the popular word for most of them is Pop. In other words, some ten years after the Pop movement was recognized in painting and sculpture - giant hamburgers and Campbell Soup cans and all that - Pop has come to architecture.

My friend and colleague Eric Westbrook, director of the National Gallery, made headline news recently by saying that we are in danger of having all the fun taken out of our lives in cities, by the "good taste" of architects and planners. (I think I quote him fairly correctly.) He was seeking visual fun in our streets, such as artists, he thought, could give them; and he thought that Canberra was the prize example of the sterile horror of planning: living there would be

nightmare!

Late last year one of the most distinguished and advanced associations of architecture, the Architectural League of New York, held an exhibition of photographs of the work of - who? A man named Morris Lapidus, who does the corniest Hollywood-style interiors at Miami Beach. (He's been called, by a non-admirer, "the Lawrence Welk of architecture"). By any standards at all his work is pseudo, phoney, lush and ludicrous. The fact that the Architectural League of New York now honours him indicated more clearly than anything the way the wind is blowing. It's like having a collection of photographs of the beef-burger joints, the poor-man's Americana of motels and fairy-light strings in Surfers Paradise, as a serious exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria. (And don't think that's impossible.") It is, to my mind, a desperate last effort by some people, recognizing a very real crisis in the development of the environment, to get with what appears to be the up and coming strength.

But to consider the thoughtless, careless, sucker-bait trimmings of commercial architectural show-business worthy of serious contemplation seems to me to be more evidence of sickness. I'm not suggesting that the bright-light, cutout visuals of a place like Surfers are sick; far from it. Only those who try to pretend that they are anything but a money-trap may be ~~a little off-colour~~ *suffering a syndrome, as they say - the Surfers Syndrome in this case.*

But I ask again: what do we want of architecture? Has society in fact got tired of serious design and urban planning - so soon, after it just got started in Canberra? Is life in Canberra really a nightmare of prim prissy prettiness - enough to send one screaming in search of a flashing skysign for Chateau Gay? If so, how come nearly everybody who lives there seems so happy about Canberra? Even the teenagers for whom, admittedly, the planners have done nothing, don't seem to be more discontent than those in any other city of only 125,000 people, or even those in Swinging Melbourne. Do people really resent the orderliness of Canberra - the landscaping, the lawns, the lake, the underground wiring, the highways? Is all that a sort of 1984 prison

for the soul, or is it, for the first time ever in Australia, just a good piece of urban housekeeping?

I am the first to admit that our Australian architecture and planning are not as exciting, as good as they should be. As I said earlier, I think many of our new city buildings, for example, are dull to tears. But there are reasons for that in our economy, our education, our dependence on foreign capital, and our other social complications. I think it fair to say that our architecture and our urban planning are on the same level as our engineering, our art, our cooking, our newspapers - in short, they are us. We won't improve the situation by turning back to a free-for-all, or turning to experts from overseas to help - both increasingly popular non-solutions to our problem. We need better architecture and planning: more ^{imaginatively} exciting, more involving, more our own. And the way to get it is to demand it, to look around us with more open eyes and to speak out about what we don't like. To think, and to ask, in short - again and again - "what do we want of architecture?"