

SCHOOL ARCHITECTURE - for 'The Secondary Teacher'

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Victoria's school-building programme over the past ten years has produced two architectural types, familiar now to everyone in the outer suburbs. One is the utilitarian State School type designed ~~(if one can say that sausages are designed)~~ by the Public Works Department. This standardised pattern of low skillion roofs at right angles to one another and big multi-pane windows has hardly changed for ten years. It is literally and figuratively colourless. It answers the problem of greater space for lower cost honestly and sensibly, without any pretence of artistry or elegance. As such the State school style is satisfactory. If it teaches our school children nothing about architecture at least it does not suggest to them bad habits, as did the Gothicky schoolhouses of last century, nor should it depress and oppress them in the way of those horrible red brick and yellow cement school-prisons built in the early twentieth century.

The other type is that of the private (or public) schools. It is hardly less utilitarian and, with few exceptions, seems hardly less standardised. It looks much more solid, however. The private schools favour bricks rather than timber framing, and though their budgets are tight they still retain in the back of their minds a wistful and ever so faint memory of Eton. This sometimes gives them a vague touch of monumentality around the entrance section while the rest is as bland and matter-of-fact as a factory or a laboratory. The usual architectural

pattern is the one devised by the famous German-born architect Mies van der Rohe, seen at its best in the Illinois Institute of Technology, built about 1953, a project which greatly impressed architects all over the world. Strictly rectilinear boxes are built up of spare black steel skeletons, infilled with bricks or glass.

Few of our new Victorian schools are good architecture. This is not surprising since they only differ from other buildings in minor matters and few buildings of any sort are good. The low standard is partly the responsibility of the architectural profession, and partly the fault of its clients: the school promoters, committees, the parents and teachers of the State - in short, the Victorian public, which is inclined not to care enough about the quality of its buildings. As I say, it is not surprising when we fail to get good schools; the remarkable thing is that we get so few that are really bad from the architectural standpoint. I will suggest reasons for this in a moment. The more important point to be made now is that the worst mistakes in school design today are not superficial or artistic, not errors of taste - but they may be errors of social organisation. They concern the town-planner rather than the detail designer. I refer to the centrifugal force generated by a big city like Melbourne. This force acts on all institutions such as schools which are not actually bound to the centre of the city by social or commercial ties. Every one of our older schools have felt this force. Some of them have resisted it, but to others it has been strong enough to tear out roots planted many decades ago.

Old or new, most schools have been flung by the economic forces of the growing city out to the perimeter. In each individual case the reasons for moving out seemed compelling if not inescapable. Inner suburban

land was too costly for a growing school. As soon as the decision was made to move to broad acres out in the near bush the financial pressures eased all over. But if this pattern continues Melbourne will finish by having no suburban schools at all, just a ring of country schools around it. From the broader viewpoint of the townplanner, considering the community as a whole, the schools' escape to the hills is no solution to the city's problem; it is merely an evasion of the problem, and an aggravation of all the difficulties in social activities and communication associated with sprawling suburbia.

If we had had any good examples of an alternative solution, the flight from the city might not have been so fast and general. But the fact is that dear old Melbourne, perhaps the world's most suburban-minded non-city of two million people, has hardly one single suburban school. It has never, of course, encouraged the fully urban school type which has appeared in Europe: the multi-storey development with little or no exterior yard space. But it has not even developed the suburban type, with modified open ground development and a concentration of building in two and three storeys. From the beginning Melbourne's schools have tended to be country schools, and they had to retreat as the suburbs grew.

There seems to be a serious need now for a return of the schools to the great ring of better inner suburbs. If they are left school-less these areas will grow old and depressed before their time, for they cannot attract young families. If this is agreed, the problem then returns to the architect. Can a restricted suburban site, such as the many vacated recently by old mansions, be a suitable place for a growing school?

It can be. Of course it cannot have olympic-standard playing fields. On the other hand it can, if properly planned, have adequate physical-educational facilities in gymnasias and swimming pools. It can, and must, have classrooms which are just as light and well-ventilated as those of any ranch-style development, and it can if well planned be infinitely more convenient to manage. Architecturally it can possess a compact homogeneity which might easily consolidate the school better in spirit as well as in fact.

These good qualities are not of course by any means inevitable when a suburban school is built. A compact school on limited land is harder to do well than a sprawling pavilion-type complex. But imaginative architectural design can certainly bring out as many good, appropriate qualities in the former as in the latter. Design is the key to success in the suburban school, to a much greater extent than it is in our present kind. As a matter of fact, without wishing to be over cynical it can be said that it is almost impossible to design a bad school of the present kind if you are given enough land in which to spread the different parts about.

School design is as good as it is - or, should I say, is less bad than average design - for two good reasons. One is that the promoter, the architect's client, usually knows what he wants more sharply than most clients do. The architect's brief is specific. The physical requirements of the basic unit, the classroom, are laid down in fine detail by regulations. The most incompetent spec builder could not legally fail to build well-ventilated and properly lighted classrooms.

Equally important, the artistic brief is usually as open as the physical brief is specific. School architecture is usually wonderfully free of the disturbing element of advertising which is the blight of the Australian environment. Schools of course don't need direct advertisements or are too well-behaved to admit the methods of the supermarket or the service-station. Moreover they don't feel the need to attract the eye of the passer-by, as even some churches do, to remind the community of their existence. Schools are free of any need to impress or to prove themselves in the public eye. They are not even asked by owners to look more expensive or resplendent than they really are. They are desperately wanted by the community, so they can afford to appear straightforwardly and honestly as their nature calls on them to be: light and fresh, disciplined yet not oppressive.

This is, roughly speaking, how they are required to be by law, and as such they are at least a healthy negative architectural relief from the spec builders' or service-stations' styles. Whenever an architect is permitted to go a little further and add a quality of imaginative artistry, then the school building itself can be a positive influence in the education of the school child.
