American Influences on Australian Architecture and -
THE GRIFFIN LEGEND

American influence of the Coke and Gunsmoke kind permeates Australia as it does any other country, only more so. The sad thing is that the higher levels of American culture usually stay at home and are practically unknown here.

Thus one expects an Australian disc jockey to adopt a phony American accent, just as one expects Australian painting to be as independent as if Christopher Columbus had never left home.

All that is a well-worn truism, but a funny sort of contradiction occurs in the funny sort of half-pop, half-cultured art which is architecture. Here the reverse is inclined to happen. A few of the richest and most important buildings lately have been taking the American precedent so seriously that they actually import American architects. This includes two skyscrapers in Melbourne including the flashy Southern Cross hotel, and a major new hotel for Qantas now building in Sydney.

The American influence is apparent enough in most of the other city buildings and overwhelmingly apparent in most of the more urgent commercial enterprises such as "diners" and "Do-nut" shops. But when one gets down to the really popular level of architecture, the average private house which in countless superficial variations makes up the great sprawl of suburbs around every Australian city or town is not in any recognizable way influenced by America. It has evolved over a century or so very gradually from the original Colonial cottage.

One by one the amenities have been added. The kitchen moved in about 1840, the bathroom about 1870, built-in cupboards about 1900, the hotwater service about 1930, bigger windows about 1950, central heating, unconscionably late, about 1955, airconditioning still now trembling on the brink of general acceptance.

All the time the house itself was rather feebly adjusting its plan to changing social conditions, dropping off the veranda, the maid's room, and the fretwork one by one as it moved into the twentieth century. It was attacked by decorative fashions at intervals, and some of these were American. After the first world war a lot of river-washed stone was stuck to the faces of some houses that were marketted as 'Californian Bungalows', and some ten years later swirls of yellow cement and a pair of barley-sugar columns on the porches were promoted as 'Spanish Mission', which also had immediately recognizable Hollywoodian connotations. In recent years a few of the more highly-pressured merchant builders have tried adding American Colonial trifles to the fronts of their stock houses, in the form of wavy bargeboards and multi-pane windows, and have offered these under enticing names like 'The Virginian', 'The Bellair' and the 'Rhett Butler'.

But not one of these artificial injections of American flavour have affected the ordinary common house. Always at heart the Australian house remained involuntarily Australian, and if one of them were to be dropped in the middle of any American housing tract it would immediately be shown up as an uncouth foreigner with a funny tilted hat: short in bathrooms, long in space and colour and, of all things, stainless steel sinks.

The lack of American influence at this level is really very odd, considering considering the pop art field as a whole and the domination of American influence in television, cars, motels, radio, and most other media of popular expression.

The closest personal connection Australia ever had with American architecture, apart from the few forty-niners who put up their tents and huts in the Victorian gold rush of the eighteen-fifties, was through a great man named Walter Burley Griffin, and his wife, Marion Mahony.

Griffin came from Chicago. He was an associate of Frank Lloyd Wright at one time, but was running his own modest office in 1912 when, at the age of 36, he won an international competition called for the plan of Canberra, Australia's capital city to be created in the bush.

The brilliance of his work is hardly known in the USA because he was then invited to Australia to supervise the start of construction at Canberra and, though he suffered maddening frustrations at the hands of bureaucracy in that task, he stayed on. He opened offices in Sydney and Melbourne, and in twenty years before he died (on a long professional visit to India) he was responsible for a number of remarkable buildings. They were as advanced as anything built anywhere at their time.

The most representative and popular of his buildings probably was the Capitol Theatre in the middle of downtown Melbourne, built between 1922 and 1924. Griffin had a capacity for not anticipating trouble, and shedding worries when they came, which helped to produce in him outstanding professional courage and will to adventure. In the Capitol building he made numerous daring innovations, and took some perilous risks. His

task was to combine on a narrow city site a movie theatre seating two thousand, full theatre stage facilities, shops at street level, grandly spacious foyers, and a heavy stack of office floors rising above to the 132-feet height limit then in force. The intricate interlacing of functions that he planned called for structural gymnastics, including offices suspended on tensile droppers from giant beams spanning the width of the site, and one major internal lattice beam through which one walked to the dress circle. All of this was in reinforced concrete. He believed in the organic nature of monolithic construction and never used steel frames.

No permit for the building as a whole was ever issued by the city authorities. The bewildered and sceptical inspectors reluctantly passed it floor by floor as each alarming element was completed.

The interior of the auditorium marked the climax of Griffin's creative life. At the outset one of his clients showed him a handful of coloured crystals he has picked up in Vienna. He wanted a ceiling like that. Griffin accepted the idea with enthusiasm, but he saw the crystals enlarged a hundred times, and to be practical, made of plaster, but transformed by crystalline light. His idea was to paint the white plaster with the flow of thousands of primary coloured lights - red, blue, and green - concealed in projections of a ceiling intricately broken to give acoustical diffusion. A sort of prismatic torpedo shape some ten feet long became the basic element cast in fibrous plaster and repeated scores of times. These projected from the upper part of the walls like horizontal stalactites and above them the ceiling itself rose i n a hollow pyramid of wide white solid

bands separated by strips of prismatically textured plaster. Six thousand coloured globes were concealed in the solid torpedos and bands, and each was controlled by rheostat from a light-organ console backstage. The ceiling came alive between movies, the "paint" continuously changing colour, flooding and retracting between the bands, spotting and diffusing in new shades, then glowing as a mysterious fluid white made up of all the lights together.

Griffin suffered many disappointments. His fame as the planner of Canberra won him commissions, but his uncompromising devotion to revolutionary architectural ideas did not ensure popularity nor continuity of work. Towards the end he had to become his own client, as it were, initiating projects such as small city offices and municipal incinerators. He had no time for the plain Functionalist architecture which was making tentative appearances in the late 'twenties and early 'thirties. A few years after his death in 1937 he was forgotten except by architectural historians and some officials at Canberra. But they kept his memory on ice.

Then, some five or ten years ago, a new generation of younger architects began to feel more sympathy with his work, and to hunt it out and study it. At the same time his plan for Canberra was officially reinstated. It was adapted to suit changed conditions, but the essential Griffin ideas were kept intact. Something amounting almost to a Griffin cult has since developed. The artificial lake that threads through the centre of Canberra has been named Lake Burley Griffin. Griffin's head appeared on an Australian postage stamp to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the city's foundation. The first of a number of long-promised

biographies appeared late last year. It is by James Birrell, published by Queensland University Press. Every threat to a Griffin building now arouses voluble and partly effective opposition. His best house, the Salter House in Glyndebourne Avenue, Toorak, appears to be safe after an episode last year in which it was threatened by the wrecker.

Nonetheless, his works are disappearing one by one. Only a month or so ago the Capitol Theatre closed, a victim of television and parking difficulties. Its fate now rests on the success of moves being made to reopen it as a legitimate theatre. But it has many friends working to save it, for the name Griffin means something to many sensitive laymen now as well as to architects. He has become almost a legend: of a brilliant, unorthodox and very human fighter for an artistic ideal and perhaps America's greatest ever export to Australia after the T-model Ford.

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