

own order upon history and legend. The will to impose order succeeded, in my opinion; it was the gods that failed.

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## Architecture

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ROBIN BOYD

### The Canberra Virus

Chandigarh started with a crash of Corbusian cymbals, even if it was inclined to break down later into less impressive rattles. Brasilia started with a fanfare of trumpets and continues now, after seven years, as if to a never-ending roll of kettledrums. Canberra started with a squabble, then stopped, and went, and hesitated, and went on again in a painful exhibition of democratic indecisiveness and bureaucratic stodginess. But at last, having reached its fiftieth anniversary, it is beginning to look loved, and almost like an artificial capital city.

The bridges are built across the low central river flats which for years divided the town in two. The dam has been closed lower down, so that the clear mountain water of wandering, pebbly Molonglo River is spreading and in places already touches the stone walls that will form the perimeter of artificial Lake Burley Griffin. But nothing happens dramatically to Canberra. Nature has taken its time from the administrators. One solid downpour in the catchment area could have filled the lake spectacularly almost overnight any time after the dam was closed, and one feels that this is the way Nature would have

done the job for Chandigarh or Brasilia. Instead, this is something of a record in dry summers and it has hardly rained in the few weeks since the dam was closed. The lower basin is substantially full and satisfactorily blue-grey but the central and upper basins are still only a scatter of creeping puddles. Even when filled it will not be a big lake, only about six miles long and half a mile to a mile wide. An English visitor in the next seat of our approaching plane, excitedly straining for his first sight of it through the oval window, suddenly realized that the puddles were the lake and said, 'Is that it?' in a rather depressed way.

Nevertheless it will be soon a good blue body of water that would be an asset in the centre of any city, and it is shapely. On a map or from the air its main body is the classic dog's-chewing-bone shape, and it is frayed at some edges where, contrary to Walter Burley Griffin's original plan, it follows contours rather than compasses. It will be a handsome focal centre to the city. It was indispensable to the plan, linking the separated halves. And yet there were years when one thought it would never be constructed. Even now, filling placidly at a cost of three million pounds, it is a symbol of the new attitude to Australia's bush capital.

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This is no place to retell the history of Canberra, but for the benefit of new readers here in brief is the story so far:

To resolve the rivalry between Sydney and Melbourne, the site was chosen on neutral territory: a picturesque valley with a river and an old homestead or two. An international competition was held for the plan. The first prize was won by Griffin, of Chicago, a colleague of Frank Lloyd Wright. Bureaucratic

opposition to the bold plan developed. Griffin was invited to Australia and appointed Director of Design, but he met with administrative difficulties and unhelpful politics. In 1922 he resigned, having built nothing. The early buildings were done by departmental architects and were Spanish and modest, though good for their time. But gradually control lapsed, and by 1954 the city was at the lowest point in its development. The central commercial area was almost as lurid and unruly as that of any bustling provincial town. Foreign embassies were terribly polite. In the absence of any specific indication from the host, they dressed in period national costume: the United States in Williamsburg-Colonial, South Africa in Cecil Rhodes Style, and so on. Then a Senate Enquiry was held, and as a result the Government decided it was time to call in another outside expert. In 1957 Sir William Holford was invited from England to advise, and the next year John W. Overall was appointed Commissioner of an organization called the National Capital Development Commission. Its stated policy was to establish and complete Canberra as the seat of Government and the administrative centre, to give it atmosphere and an individuality worthy of the national capital, and to make it a good place to live 'in comfort and dignity'. The Commission retained Holford's services as design consultant on the lake and bridges.

Now read on :

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Canberra now wants to be good, and it knows that Australia wants it to be good. Any faults that are apparent now are not for want of trying. And the basic

things are good. The enclosed valley site is perhaps the most attractive of all those taken for artificial capitals around the world. The climate is rarely extreme either way. Most days the city basks in sunlight so clear that the white cement and metal trims of the new buildings reflect dazzling highlights from far away, and shadows are black on the pebbled paving.

All the main lines of the Griffin plan are now drawn in by the principal roads, and from many points on the ground, not to mention the air, the overall form grows clear. Inside the star clusters of suburbs a triangle of focal points, and two main axes—one between the two closest hills and one at right angles across the water—are taking shape. It is an effective if slightly old-fashioned shape. Griffin's vistas were long: nearly two miles from one focal point to another. Someone has superimposed the central triangle on to a map of London for comparative purposes and has found that the points touch Marble Arch, Lincoln Inn Fields and Primrose Hill respectively.

During the years when the roads were only half-formed, and the buildings were unrelated and few, and the lake was farm paddocks, the ghost of the Griffin triangle looked pompous and ridiculously overblown. Even now it is only a series of generally unclosed vistas, long perspectives with nothing but a needle or a flagpole at the distant end, temporarily marking the spot for some national monument. Even so the scale of the concept is seen now to be correctly balanced, not too petty against nature's grander display in the hills around, yet not too big to lose intimacy. However stiff, formal or academic Griffin's plan may be by today's stan-

dards, it is now established well enough to show that there is no more danger of its becoming pompous than there is prospect of its making a bold dramatic statement.

Griffin's plan has been adapted sympathetically to suit modern conditions but there has not been at any time any serious intention to follow his architectural suggestions. These were horizontally inclined, punctuated by towers, and dominated by a great stepped pyramid 300 feet at the base and 225 feet high on Capitol Hill. After Griffin, Canberra has had no Neimeyer or Le Corbusier to give it architectural drive. It has not asked for one. A hundred architects have had a finger in the pie, each alerted to the importance of the occasion and doing his best, which means in most cases being as imaginatively different as possible from anything done by the ninety-nine others.

The rôle of the National Capital Development Commission is to initiate projects and to control them. It rarely designs. It works through earlier-established departments and with private enterprise wherever possible, and it appoints the architects for the public buildings. On paper, the Commission is omnipotent, but it chooses not to rub this in. Instead it uses its administrative powers gently, relying mostly on tactful influence to encourage the private promoters to do the right thing. For instance, a city block near the Civic Centre was set aside for office space, private and public. One big building could have supplied sufficient floor area. It would not have been enormous by any old city standards, not to mention planned city standards. Instead the land was subdivided and the pieces let off to private interests under covenants

which determined the overall mass of each building in accordance with a pre-determined plan, low at the front, craggily building up to twelve stories in the centre back. Each architect was limited to a similar monochromatic colour scheme and by certain other restrictions, such as a ban on projections other than sunshading devices. Otherwise they were free to express their individuality; and they did. Some of them used every loophole in the covenant to depart from the anonymous façade treatments that the occasion called for. The result, now almost complete, is no disgrace. It looks as any group of competitive offices might look in any unplanned town in a country of fairly consistent taste. Which makes it un-Australian, but far from ideal.

Nevertheless it is a model of homogeneity compared with the campus of the Australian National University nearby. Nearly every building here is by a different architect. While any one of these men undoubtedly could have made a delightful and consistent collection of buildings on his own, most seem affected by the old Canberra architectural virus that turned the foreign embassy buildings into a fancy-dress charade during the nineteen-fifties. Practically everything on the campus is an island, splendidly independent in style, colour and atmospherics. There are round arches, pointed arches, plain colonnades, fancy colonnades, hints of past or distant styles from Greenway-Colonial to French-Canadian, mostly adorned with several kinds of metal sculpture. Only one thing is consistent, or almost consistent. Most of these works adhere to the new romantic persuasion—charming, arcaded and rather

mincing—which has lately replaced in many countries the austere ethics of the International Style: The Pederarch Style, as one Melbourne critic described it sourly. But at least these buildings are not cheek by jowl, and between them a flattering and separating veil of greenery is growing up.

Canberra from the beginning has indicated deep-seated impatience with architecture. The buildings themselves have been considered as almost irrelevant details, provided there are plenty of trees, sufficient space, and a plan. The capital continues to demonstrate this attitude as it grows and fills in. Long vistas, sweeps of circular roads, ponds, bridges, lawns, copses, avenues in endless perspective, neat kerbs, signs, lights and fences, blue skies clear of wires—these add up to the success so far of the National Capital Development Commission, and they really represent more than a success. It is a triumph in view of Australia's usual attitude to such things.

The centre of this great garden tidiness is the central basin of the lake, a geometrical crescent of water a mile long and bound at each end by thousand-foot bridges. These bridges are probably the boldest structural elements of the city. Each is twins, two traffic lanes in each direction separated by an open well, bowed gently over four or five block pylons. The long spans of poststressed concrete are impressive and at night when the strip lights concealed in the handrails flood the pavements they are impeccable engineering ornaments in a world of disciplined nature.

Yet even these splendid ribbons seem to have been attacked by the Canberra virus. The main bridge of the two, the

one on Commonwealth Avenue, has a pylon at each corner, a thin vertical needle only thirty feet or so high and quite extraordinarily indecisive. It is 1934, the Rockefeller Centre step-back style, done in grey granite with a white concrete tongue running up the front and rising a little higher. Even supposing these pylons had been strongly designed, why are they there at all? One explanation is that the bridge needed emphasis; another that a main sewer vent needed concealment. In any event they do little real damage to the fine bridge and are not important except as a symptom. They do nothing to dispel the concern of a number of Australian architects over the prospects for the major building that will be seen from this major bridge. For the climax, the centrepiece of the capital, will be Parliament House—the permanent building which must be built to replace the present temporary, forty-year-old one.

A year ago the subject of the design of this building became national news for a day or two, following a strong rumour that Sir William Holford was designing it. But eventually the rumour was denied and Sir William was reported to the effect that he felt it should be designed by an Australian. Nothing has yet been announced officially, though no doubt a decision has already been made privately. In any case, the alternatives are: inviting Holford or some other renowned man from abroad; or holding a competition—national or international; or appointing an Australian outright. The discussion on the subject has thrown interesting light on the strength of Australia's sense of national identity at this time.

Everyone seemed to agree that a per-

manent Federal Parliament House was the most important, most 'significant' single building ever projected in Australia and somehow should be nationally symbolic, a magnificent vision of a young country marching to maturity and all that sort of thing. And yet the confidence that such a vision could be realized by an Australian was by no means general. Apparently the proposal that an Englishman should design it was made seriously and proceeded some way before it was abandoned finally, the Englishman himself having to tell the Australian Government that this did not seem to be a proper thing.

The successes and publicity for Australian art in several fields in Britain in the past decade might lead one to believe that the old outback spirit of independence and self-confidence permeated now to the artistic frontiers. But don't you believe that yet awhile. In a moment of artistic difficulty or dilemma the Australian Establishment still looks trustingly to the Old Country for guidance.

*Postscript:* In April the dry spell broke. Rain fell for a week. The puddles linked. The lake filled. Then the sun came out, and it was as if a curtain was rising on the third act of the Canberra performance. With an uncharacteristic dramatic suddenness that surprised even the planners in the Development Commission, Canberra came into focus: the vistas and the cross-axes brilliantly clear, the good scale confirmed. The blue sheet of water welded two villages into one city. The Griffin vision, the Commission's long-published aerial perspective, and the faith of many friends through fifty years were justified. Be-

hind the trees and scaffolding the architectural antics carried on, but they didn't seem so important or disastrous any more.

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## Selected Books

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J. MACLAREN-ROSS

### The World of Robert Bloch

The practice of authors writing directly for paperback publication has become increasingly widespread in the United States. Among writers of suspense and mystery stories it is no longer confined to purely sensational and sub-pornographic 'fictioneers' of the Hank Janson-Carter Brown type, and was indeed strongly advocated by the late Raymond Chandler, who at one time seriously considered it himself. The reason for this is a simple matter of finance, since by writing a paperback 'original', an author receives the usual percentage of royalties on an edition of thousands of copies, instead of halving the profits with a hardback publisher, as is still the case in the USA (despite the efforts of the Authors' Guild of America to enforce a more equitable state of affairs) and certainly in Great Britain, where a fifty-fifty clause is taken for granted in every contract.

Two startlingly individual novelists accessible for the most part in paperbacks are John Roeburt, superficially a tough detective writer in the Dashiell Hammett tradition but specializing in