

LOOK BACK IN APATHY

In these days when a number of young men - English ones at least - are making a virtue and business of anger and are pleased to be receiving sympathetic encouragement, it should surprise us to find an artistic field in which the young men are tranquil, docile, almost apologetic for being young. There is such a field without rancour, and if you have not been surprised by it until now this merely proves how few people know even that the field exists. The field I refer to is the one in which are planted, or should be planted, the tender green theories which will shape the buildings of next decade.

The young men of architecture are free of anger. They look back in ennui, apparently, if they look back at all; and they look forward with a sort of polite, pessimistic fatalism. Now, the funny thing is that buildings have the power to make some people angry. Nothing else produced by man in the name of art - no poor play, no incompetent painting, no dull poem, no cacophony of music - makes a layman so furious as a building which he considers arty but impractical. I have met hundreds of angry architects clients in many countries in the last decade, but hardly a single angry young architect anywhere in the world.

The architectural serenity does vary in quality from country to country. In the U.S.A. the principal explanation for the silence of architectural youth is probably that it is only one facet of a general satisfaction of young people with the status quo. Among architecture students in America I found a certain dissatisfaction with the immediate past in modern

architecture, and a superior attitude to the older pioneers, and to the wilder commercial excesses of the present day. But this was nothing like anger, and the more general emotion is a cosy confidence in the way the practicing generation is leading the team. The young man's objective is to get up there as soon as possible with Skidmore, Owings and Merrill and copy Mies van der Rohe as competently as they are doing it.

In England the reasons for silence may be different. The young architect there, with every justification, is more critical of the work of the practicing generation. The English architectural critic Reyner Banham (whose article in the New Statesman, 29/3/58, evoked these reflections) gave one explanation for the coolness of the young Englishman which is peculiarly English. If angry young architects do exist, he wrote, the main targets for their rage are internal. They find plenty to revolt against in the revolting work which the "Old Boy Network" in their own profession produces. But one of the only ways left to a young man to get started in practice is to cultivate profitable contacts among the Old Boys, who hand down work to them. "Speak out of turn and the supply of gravy from above dries up", says Banham. "Hence the impotent silence of the profession at some of its architectural scandals that ought to have been thoroughly aired in public".

That shocking state of affairs has no parallel that I know of in Australia, or the U.S.A. or anywhere else outside Britain. Yet it does not reflect on the English young man. On

the contrary it gives him at least a logical mercenary excuse for his silence. We can see that he may have the intelligence actually to be angry under his political cloak of conformity. The real tragedy is the student who has not even a selfish reason for his silence in the midst of an architectural situation which yawns for want of any strong emotion.

Why is Australian architectural youth practically silent, without a students' journal of any consequence let alone an outspoken graduates' mouthpiece? Why should it happen that Australian architects usually have only praise for Australian architecture while laymen usually have only complaint? The young Australian gets no gravy passed down from the older members of the profession. On purely predatory grounds the young man has every reason to attack and none to support by silence the older man. Then does the young man of Australian architecture feel the warm confidence of his American cousin in the essential rightness of his leaders? If he does, he has no good cause for it. On the highest plane this probably is a sort of Golden Age of American architecture, like the Georgian of England. It is the bright afternoon of the influence of the sensitive theorists who founded the principles of modern architecture in Europe forty years ago. American technology has permitted the theories to flower, but there is no convincing sign of any young American movement replenishing the roots. However at least while the old Europeans still live and prosper in America, youth has reason to feel confidence in its leadership. In Australia the masters' influence is not direct and the quality of general practice is not so high as to leave a young

architect speechless with admiration. But it is better than it was before the war, and perhaps this is the reason for the tranquility.

Sometime about 1950 Australian architecture, fearfully late, turned a corner. On the surface it was adopting a new style : the Modern, or Contemporary, or Functional, for want of a better word. Many architects who had old-established lucrative practices built on historical styles began turning out simple boxes. Some two generations after the promulgation of the principles and ethics of modern architecture they were accepted by the popular architects. Without missing a beat or a commission or a single percentage of fees, almost the entire profession of architecture changed step simultaneously. I do not mean to suggest that this was a mean or shoddy thing. In many cases it meant a genuine acceptance of new ethics and principles. It was much more than a change of style. And it is just this that seems to have caught the young men off guard. Ten-twenty years ago the young men saw the old men growing rotund on a routine of stale design formulae. The young men meanwhile were burning with the conviction of new ethics of rationalism in design. They knew the old men had not even heard of these ethics. It was easy to be righteously angry then. But today the revolution is over - partly a success, partly a compromise - and the professional air is still for a time. Before there can be new internal anger there must be new theories and, badly as these may be needed, they are not forthcoming at this busy time.

This still does not explain, however, the complacency of the young man in relation to the vast ugliness outside the control

of the leaders of his profession. How can he contemplate so coolly the shops, houses, factories, advertisements - the nine-tenths of the modern world not designed by responsible architects, the most hideous visual squalor yet created by man in any era of barbarity? Can the young man of architecture be blind to this, or unmoved by it?

The answer, I think, is that he is very aware of it and moved by it to a point beyond anger, a point near despair. He doesn't speak of it because he doesn't know where to start, He feels an outsider all right, but not Colin Wilson's sort; he is more interested in the physical world than the normal man. He feels terrible responsibility and importance in his mission to re-shape the world. He feels superior and yet he knows he cannot begin to explain why he is needed by the world, for he has no artistic contact with other men, particularly with other artists. He is separated from them by his belief that ultimate visual satisfaction can be found entirely within the range of useful objects, and he is separated from the practical man by his belief that beauty is indivisible from, and as important as utility.

The young architect seems to dabble less in "cultural affairs" than anyone else with cultural pretensions. You don't often meet him at the art show, the concert, the theatre; you don't find him reading. If you discover him talking about architecture it will be to other young architects. Other times he will be in the noisier pubs with the practical men and no word of architecture could you prise out of him. If architects as a race are reprehensible for being narrow in their interests (is any group in the

community more confined?), the bulk of the population has driven them to it by being so innocent and ill-educated visually that no meeting ground for serious discussion is possible.

The nearest thing to public speaking to which the young architects of Australia have approached for many years is a little irregular Melbourne Students' paper called 'Slate'. Sometime last year it published a piece about the architects' role in shaping the world, called "We Too Are God". It was an embarrassingly silly article, but the title should serve to illustrate what I mean.