

By the architect
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SOON Australia must plan the two most momentous buildings of her 176 years. They are the sister centrepieces of Canberra, the permanent Parliament House and the National Centre.

Both buildings will be even more important than their magnificent sites and high functions suggest. Their architecture will be called upon to be in some way transcendental. For they will represent the Australian achievement to this stage. Or even more: they will be asked to symbolise the Australian civilisation.

This is really not overstating the case. Already, even without its centrepieces, Canberra is becoming a symbol. And how badly we need one. What a weird dawn-light we live in! A young (ish) nation bursting with pride and potential bracketing itself in common thinking with nothing less than the United States when it speaks of affluence and technological drive, and yet without its own national anthem, without anything tangible other than the Sydney Bridge as an image to express that furious belief in itself.

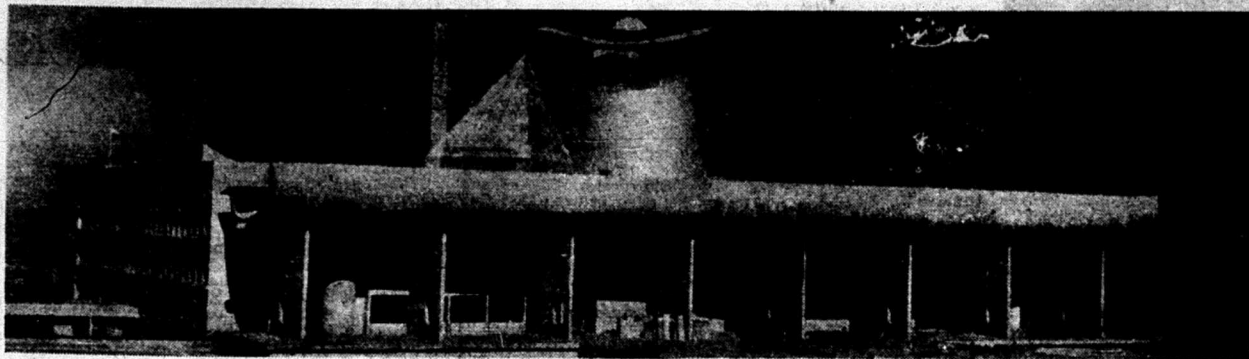
Canberra has been chasing after symbolic feeling to some extent from the very beginning. This quest was lost to sight at times, but since the real growth of the city began in the last few years the bush capital has blossomed functionally and visually. Now it clearly promises to be a spot where the Nation's spirit is focussed.

Yet everything that has happened so far in Canberra in the way of town planning and architecture is to an extent just preamble. It has been making a fine setting, building up to the climax. The climax, which cannot be put off much longer, will be the placing of these two gems into the prepared setting.

Parliament House is clearly the more important and potentially the more contentious of the two. It will be the home of Australian Government for as long as one can look into the future, while the present temporary building will become the hub of a conference centre.

Whatever is built for our permanent Parliament House is bound to be the cause of controversy. Sections of the public will see it not as a national symbol but only as a more comfy home for politicians. And already, even before the accommodation requirements have been seriously considered, political disagreement has arisen over the choice of a site for it.

The Government wants it to be built in front of the present temporary building on the shore of Lake Burley Griffin. And it plans to put the National Centre on top of Capital Hill, where it



Too modern? The Legislative Assembly building, Chandigarh, India

SYMBOL CITY



Too modern? President's executive office in Brasilia

Canberra approaches a new era as a national show-piece

would take the form of a series of galleries, museums and an exhibition hall, probably ringed around a major monument set on the summit. This is the arrangement shown on the present plans of the National Capital Development Commission. The National Centre is thus at the apex of the main triangle of Griffin's plan, and also terminates the central axis of the plan, looking over two miles to the war memorial at the foot of Mt Ainslie.

The Leader of the Opposition wants the dominating position on Capital Hill for Parliament House, as Griffin planned it. In which case the National Centre would go, no doubt, on the lake-side site.

The Prime Minister has suggested a joint select committee, representing the three major parties, to investigate the requirements of the new Parliament House. This committee would, in effect, write the brief or programme to be presented to the architects. It would decide on the accommodation required in the two houses and the needs of members, staff, Press and public, of radio and television and so on.

But that is where the matter rests for the moment, for Mr Calwell has replied to Sir Robert that decisions on such matters are premature before agreement is reached on the siting of the building.

There are good and poor arguments in favor of each site. Down by the lake the Parliament House would be in the geometrical centre of Canberra. It would fill the now empty focal point at the centre of the lake between the two fine bridges. It would be reflected in the water. These are good visual arguments. It would also be reminiscent of the site of the British Houses on the Thames, which is less relevant.

Upon the hill as originally planned, Parliament House would, appropriately, dominate its own capital city and would be, so some elders argue, safely above the asthmatic mists of the lake. It would also be on

an axial line more reminiscent of the Washington plan, which seems as irrelevant as the reference to Westminster.

Traffic and access would be easier to handle down by the lake, otherwise there can be little to choose between the two sites, assuming the provision of air-conditioning and good parking facilities in either case. The choice will be made eventually on largely sentimental or emotional grounds. Either way round, the Australian capital will have two major buildings: one on the hill and one by the lake. Either way round Canberra could equally well fulfil its promise of being a great symbol.

Which way they go is not of great moment to the visual future of Canberra, but the ultimate success of the whole city hangs on the architectural design of the two buildings. The slow movement of planning for Parliament House may be largely due to fear of public resentment, but is also at least in part due to the apprehension which the design might take. Conservatives on both sides of politics fear what architects may do to it. They dread that it may look too modern, thus lacking proper dignity and monumentality. They look at what has been done at the two other comparable new capital cities of this century, Chandigarh and Brasilia, and they shudder.

In Chandigarh, in the Punjab State of India, the great leader of 20th-century architecture, Le Corbusier, has built a hulking, hefty box of grey concrete. This houses the administrative offices and a comparatively conventional Upper House. But the main space, the Lower House Chamber, takes the form of a gigantic funnel, a waisted cylinder—the shape of a wire wastepaper basket—plunging through the

middle of the box, half its top projecting out the roof. From the top of the funnel light descends for more than a hundred feet to the violently colored walls and seats of the congress. It is a brutal, breathtaking space. Then the exterior of the grey box is fractured by odd entrances, slits for light, a huge upturned canopy, an enormous abstract mural by Le Corbusier himself using his favorite palette of red, yellow, black and blue at full strength.

All this may be appropriate in the total context of Chandigarh, but it would hardly fit Canberra.

The houses of Parliament in Brasilia are not quite so conventional. Designed by Oscar Niemeyer, a sometime pupil of Le Corbusier, they are an exercise in precise geometry. The administrative offices are in twin slab skyscrapers at whose feet spreads an enormous concrete podium, a huge horizontal plane out of which rise the two pure forms of the two Houses. One is a white dome. Nothing more. No openings; it is entered from below. The other is the exact complement—a dome upside down, which is a bowl. One is for Senators, the other for the Deputies.

This stringent geometry might be appropriate in Brasilia, in a gigantic geometrical garden of Niemeyer forms, but it would hardly do for Canberra.

But have no fear! Neither the fractured Corbusian concrete nor the pure Niemeyer geometry, nor anything else of the kind, have the remotest chance of coming to Canberra.

On Monday: The likely look of our future Parliament House