

THE SHAPE OF PARLIAMENT HOUSE

The proposed permanent Parliament House to be built in Canberra can be more than a building. It can be, and many believe that it must be, a visual symbol of our civilization, of the Australian spirit. Can steel and stone and concrete respond to such a mighty challenge? Of course they can - given the right plans to follow.

The shape which our permanent House is likely to take is already suggested in official documents and recent architectural events. The National Capital Development Commission's 1964 report on "The Future Canberra" speaks of a style "of horizontal character and classical proportions". Nevertheless it adds quickly that "few would advocate a return to the classical forms of architecture". (These are brave words for the few who might are not unpowerful.)

The report goes on to remark that, on the other hand, "there would probably be general agreement" that Canberra's buildings should not be "merely in the prevailing international style". This hint of architectural compromise is given more substance in aerial perspectives and the current schematic plans.

Parliament House of the future is shown as a group of three blocks : a squat central one presumably carrying offices, connected to a square mass on either side for the upper and lower Houses respectively.

The external appearance of these three linked blocks is suggested in the style of several other sketches and models. Although the report makes clear that these should not be taken too literally, it seems likely that the masses will fall into a pattern of classically, horizontally

proportioned if plain blocks, each surrounded by a tall verandah which is supported by a colonnade of lofty, slender columns.

The way things are moving this result seems almost inevitable. We will have a trio of modern temples, reflected in the lake. And this would not be wrong. It would merely be a little defeatist, architecturally. There are several non-decorated Parthenons, or functional temples, already in Canberra, and more are on the way, and they are very satisfactory and usually well-received buildings. But they are still only part of the setting of Canberra - the setting which is building up to the climax of Parliament House.

"Australia has its own way of life and it is to be hoped that the quality and character of our national buildings will reflect. . . . the vigorous young culture which inspired them." So speaks bravely and well the Development Commission's report. But if Parliament House is too safe and classically modern, or modernly classic, it cannot reflect any young culture very vigorously. It could only symbolise one national characteristic - the one that produced Canberra in the first place - the ability to compromise.

No one would deny that this is the most difficult and momentous design problem that the Government and the National Capital Development Commission has yet had or will have to face. Whatever shape Parliament House takes, it will be criticised. And the answer to this is not just to be unoffending for this will be criticised too. Australia wants a vital symbol in Canberra, and Canberra needs a vital symbol in Parliament House.

You might think it inconceivable that this proposed new heart of Australia could be designed outside Australia, but this is still on the cards. It would be one convenient way of disposing of the vexing problem of how to select an Australian architect for the job.

Apart from direct appointment of a distinguished English architect, the other means of selecting a design that have been mentioned all rely on competition : a private one limited to about half a dozen major Australian firms, an open national competition, or an international one.

But a competition is only what its promoters make it. The results of even an open competition are never entirely unpredictable. The aim, the conditions, and the taste of the judges all control the result. If Australia really wants three sedate modern temples as its symbol, then it hardly makes any difference which of the above means of selecting an architect is adopted. The only thing at stake would be the shape of the columns. But if we want something more vital, then a vitally conceived competition could bring it forward.

Certainly there are many factors appearing to favour a bland architectural solution. Parliament House will sit (in either of the proposed positions) astride the centreline of the strictly symmetrical and essentially classical design which is Griffin's plan.

Then consider the accommodation. There are two Houses and their shared central facilities. Everything points to a balanced group of three units. Even Le Corbusier would hardly have the heart to break the symmetry.

Yet in fact, even within these conditions, an infinite number of fitting solutions, bounded only by human imagination, is possible. And this is not suggesting that anyone might consider going so far in Canberra as Le Corbusier did at Chandigarh, or Niemeyer did at Brasilia.

If ever Australia needed the help of its finest tastes and most sensitive creators, this is it. The only question is how to draw them out.

I believe that an open national competition is inevitable in this case. Accepting all the short-comings of competitions, only the right sort of public quest is likely to stir the whole of Australia enough to bring the vital ideas to the surface. But Parliament House will not be alone. Whether it goes on the lake side or on top of Capital Hill it will have a sister in the other place: the art centre, to be known as the National Centre. And these two projects cannot be, for Canberra's sake, considered separately. They represent the two sides of the coin of Australian civilization, except unlike a coin's sides they will be seen together - one above and behind the other straight down the centreline of the capital.

The architectural problem is thus harder than the sum of the two problems taken separately. It is to find some harmony between the two schemes. If they are to be an Australian symbol, these two climactic elements of Canberra cannot speak with separate voices. They are part of the one concept architecturally as they are part of the one problem of town-planning.

Thus the competition should be even bigger. It should seek joint solutions for the two buildings. If this seems unwieldy, there are ways of writing conditions that limit over-detailed planning and redundant draftsmanship, and draw out the essential creative qualities. There are also ways of inviting public interest and open discussion.

The policy of the architectural profession is against competitions if a direct commission can properly be made. But with all their faults in everyday building there is a place for open competitions. No two buildings in the next two or three hundred years are likely to be more significant than the new Parliament House and National Centre. Under the circumstances it is not only necessary that the best designs possible are accepted. It is also important that the Australian public sees that the best designs possible are accepted.