

TWO STRONG, UNPOPULAR BUILDINGS

Despite exaggerated rumours of their death, and despite rational forecasts of a glut of city office space, Australia's bigger city centres continue to grow bigger. The most spectacular of all building types, the skyscrapers, ~~are~~ climbing higher. Even those many people who have no interest in architecture watch with some pride and misgivings the growth of jagged skylines, as blunt towers of ^{business} ~~offices~~ rise between and above the cathedral spires of last century and the insurance companies' minarets of the Depression era.

It is only the height of the office blocks that causes the pride. Their bluntness causes the misgivings. Not one but two Governors-General have now scolded Australian architects at public meetings for the soul-less monotony of their grey-green glass boxes. Many less distinguished critics have added abuse of the boxes.

Unquestionably the public as a whole is on the side of any critic who calls for more interest, more permanence, more colour, beauty or romance in city buildings. For this reason two big uncompleted city buildings, one in Sydney and one in Melbourne, are assured already of their unpopularity.

Neither is a glass box of the now classic kind, like the I.C.I. Houses of Melbourne or Sydney, but both are indisputably

box-like.

The glass box tradition is only 13 years old. It began in 1951 with the United Nations Secretariat in New York, designed by an international team of architects. It was greatly encouraged by Mies van der Rohe, the world's most influential architect in the 1950's, who sought and taught an austere beauty of steel and glass.

Mies built poetry although he used the language of the mass-production factories. The same language in the hands of others who lacked his sense of relative proportions and coherence and his sensitivity in detail sometimes degenerated into a monotonous kind of copy-writing. Glass boxes of crashing dullness appeared in every corner of the globe.

In 1957 Mies built a 40-storey tower in Park Avenue for the Seagram whisky people. Its metal framing was dark bronze and its glass was dark amber. The dark glass subdued the New York towerscape beyond the window-walls to the same intensity as the bland fluorescent illumination inside, creating a totally artificial environment perfectly adapted to grey-flannelled executives. Outside, the Seagram was as plain as a giant bourbon highball, and it marked the end of the ^{first} creative period in glass towers. For there was surely nothing more to be said on the subject.

After that a reaction came: a rage for plastic shapes - domes, vaults, twists, tents, sails, folds. Most buildings that had enough freedom, by virtue of a large site or a simple function, escaped from the box. But such freedom was not enjoyed by the city office block. Circumscribed by its restricted rectangle of expensive land, by rigid sets of regulations and by the uninspiring function of office routine, the city office block remained a box. And the attractions - both functional and economic - of glass were such that the box remained a predominately glass box.

Nonetheless this office block was nervously conscious that it was not pleasing Governors-General and others, and in the years after 1957 it sought without notable success to ingratiate itself by adding things. Not ornaments in the old sense, but extra fins or folds or bubbles in the panels, or abstract sculptural screens near the entrance, or soothing bedroom colours.

Against this background the two new buildings already mentioned are brave attempts to retrace steps and pick up the problem again nearer the beginning, to make offices that are attractive to work in and appropriately unpretentious but dignified to behold. Both buildings contribute solutions of some world-wide value to the old problem.

The Melbourne one is the Royal Insurance Building, by Yuncken Freeman, Architects, on the north side of Collins Street on the top of the western hill. It is nearly square in plan and rises straight without niche or projection for eighteen floors. Each of the four sides is made of panels of what is known as "reconstructed granite", being a mixture of granite and cement, and black as the ace of spades. Each panel is one storey in height and about four feet wide. On the three sides which face open space the panels are fitted with single panes of fixed dark glass.

The panels are clearly separated so that the block-like technique of erection is apparent from the street and the indents between panels, vertically and horizontally, relieve slightly the tension of the otherwise sternly sombre walls.

The tower is set back some 25 feet from the street and will be fairly open and welcoming at ground level. None of this can be appreciated at present, however, because the builder's hoarding still obscures the base. All that can be seen from near or far is the square black tower with its minor indentations.

It promises to be unpopular because some people on viewing

it will decide that they would not care to live in a house looking like that. And some others will picture a whole city block, or the whole of Melbourne, made this way, and will shudder. Indeed either prospect is hideous.

But the essence of the architectural art is still, as it ever was, to be appropriate to the occasion. The Royal Insurance Building is not intended to be sliced up to make a lot of cosy villas. It is not intended to be repeated. And it shouldn't be viewed as if in an open paddock.

It must be viewed in context. It stands between a rather pompous old Victorian building with attached columns, and the yellow-tiled, fruitily-bronzed Temple Court of indeterminate intermediate style. A hundred other styles and fashions of a century crowd its neighbourhood, arguing and chattering a meaningless architectural babble.

In such company this building is a welcome model of sophistication, restraint and repose. Certainly its astringent darkness would be unacceptable if repeated several times along Collins Street, just as an exclusive diet of dry martinis and caviar is not to be recommended to anyone.

The new potentially-unpopular Sydney building is the first unit of the huge Australia Square project: the Pitt Street Building. It is a modest enough block by today's standards, rectangular, 14 storeys, with strip windows on the long sides and the whole raised clear of the ground so that you can look through to the excavations out of which will rise shortly the much publicised 60-storey cylindrical tower.

The architect of the whole development is Harry Seidler and this first block is in his handwriting. Its structural frame can be seen clearly. Windows and masonry panels fill in between with assurance and no nonsense. One innovation is the sets of curved, slatted, bronzed sunshades, some fixed and some adjustable, over all windows. Another is the gathering of the columns in the open ground floor area.

The building rides, not on a forest of vertical columns, but on clusters of four angled supports brought together at pavement level. Each is rather like a waiter's hand balancing a tray on straight fingers. The object, apart from the drama of the form, was to clear the space as much as possible in anticipation of the big building that will rise behind.

If Melbourne's Royal Insurance Building can be compared to a martini, this Australia Square block is neat spirit, although I am not quite sure what sort. Tequila perhaps, with a touch of bourbon and just a dash of Corio.

Both buildings make no concessions to popular tastes, but they have a quality which is lacking from many of our rather apologetic, unoffending, even mincingly pretty new buildings. They are powerful statements. They have the strength of conviction. Their respective cities may therefore, in time, learn to love them.
