

AUSTRALIAN DESIGN LOSES AGAIN

Last week the new Gladesville bridge across the Parramatta River was opened, 1000 feet long and costing £4,500 for every foot. It was described as being the result of a successful partnership between Britain and Australia - for Britons designed it, Australians only built it.

The bridge is a wide flat arch of concrete, delicately thin, and is said to be the longest prestressed concrete arch in the world. The freeway which it carries humps over the top in a coat-hanger bow.

Six thousand people attended the opening, and what a great day it was for the colony! How proud we could all be that our own Australian engineers could understand the British drawings! How proud that our technicians could follow the directions and keep it straight! But without the smallest criticism of the elegant bridge or of anyone concerned with its design, construction or opening ceremony, is it permissible to ask one simple question : why did Australia feel obliged to go to Britain in the first place for the design, the initial idea, of a new bridge?

But what happened at Gladesville is only the latest example of an odd neo-colonial cultural phenomenon which seems to insist on putting the clock back, contrary to ^{the} general current mood of this country. By some strange paradox Australia's graduation into industrial and technological maturity is being accompanied by a decline in self-reliance on the plane of ideas.

For at least 100 years and until very recently Australia naturally looked to Australian engineers, architects and other creative people for the ideas behind the things she made. (Sydney Harbour Bridge was one of the notable exceptions. British engineers gave us the noble arch, and British architects gave us the redundant pylons.) But in the last six or seven years there has been a steadily growing tendency to look overseas for guidance whenever a really big venture is proposed.

For instance, the huge Qantas hotel now under construction in Sydney is the design of the distinguished giant of American architectural firms : Skidmore, Owings and Merrill. The Shell building in Melbourne was designed by the same firm. Now the A. M. P. Society's new building on the old St. James' site opposite Shell - a whole city block promising something as spectacular as the A. M. P.'s Sydney skyscraper - is also being planned by this busy American firm.

Sydney Opera House is irrelevant in this context. Its architect was chosen by competition. Nevertheless the very idea of an international competition, which inevitably is proposed whenever a big project is mooted, is part of the same pattern of lack of assurance in Australia. There are many other pointers.

The great Chadstone shopping centre near Melbourne was designed by Welton Beckett of Los Angeles, as was the Southern Cross Hotel. The two fine bridges over Lake Burley Griffin were designed by Sir William Holford of England.

These are just a few of our new projects which are no more Australian than oak or fir trees that happen to have been planted here. Together they represent the expenditure of tens of millions of pounds, with none of it contributing to the exercise of Australian creative faculties or the development of an independent intelligence here.

In some cases there are good reasons for the brains being imported, as in the case of the Southern Cross, for which other Americans signed the cheques. Again, in the case of Melbourne's Shell building, which started the practice, it is understandable that an international company with American associations might want to keep to international-American designers.

It is much harder to explain the policy decision which made proudly Australian organisations like Qantas and A. M. P. turn their backs on Australian design. Huge quantities of Australian materials and brawn will go into their two projects. Undoubtedly they will be fine buildings. They will also be enormous monuments to what has been called our cultural cringe.

All the works in this imported-brain field utilise Australian professional help on the site to some extent, and under varying conditions of professional dignity, but if Australia's own big companies, built on Australian money, do not exercise Australian talent on their really important works, how will it ever develop?

Of course certain talents and experience are not available here. Of course it is sometimes necessary to import specialists. Of course there should be free exchange of talent and ideas throughout the world. Of course every Australian company or Government instrumentality must be free to shop anywhere in the world when it sees talent of the kind it needs and cannot get here.

But more than a suspicion remains that the attraction for shopping abroad in many cases is not that a required special talent has been sought and found. The attractions are simply the old magic aura of America in visual design, and the old association of the old country with engineering design.

Certainly American know-how may be needed for the bigger new projects, but surely this should follow some keen Australian know-why. Surely the present system is upside down, or back to front.

I know that some good citizens find no cause for despondency in this drift of constructional control from our own hands. Some argue that nothing matters but that the owners should believe they are getting the best buildings possible.

Others point out that Australian architects and engineers sometimes work abroad, as in the case of the Melbourne group which recently won a Malaysian competition, and argue that this is all part of normal cultural exchange.

But let us not deceive ourselves. There is no 'exchange' in the recent Australian projects, no equal intellectual partnership. When the day dawns that an American or English company engages Australian engineers or architects for work in their own home countries we will be able to say that all taint of architectural snobbery or cultural colonialism is gone.

In the meantime it is only misleading ourselves to think that this commissioning of outside architects is a practice adopted by any other country, however small, - which places itself above the underdeveloped nations.

It is difficult to say these things without sounding chauvinistic, jealous, or petty, and I suppose I haven't succeeded. Because of this difficulty wiser architects and engineers refrain from speaking, and so the practice grows, and Australian design remains the Cinderella in the exciting story of Australia's industrial growth.
