

## TWO CLASSICS OF MODERN DESIGN

The New Architecture and the Bauhaus, by Walter Gropius (13/6)

Garden Cities of Tomorrow, by Ebenezer Howard (9/6)

Faber paper covered editions.

Two classics of the literature of early twentieth century design have been reissued in paperback. After 63 years in one case and 30 years in the other, each has at once historical fascination and vital relevance to our cities and buildings of today.

Both of them sought a bridge, in a physical sense, between two cultures. In 1935 Walter Gropius was concerned with uniting rationalism and poetry in architecture. A generation earlier, around the turn of the century, Ebenezer Howard sought to combine the best things of city life with the good things of country living and in effect founded modern town planning.

For some years now both men have been misunderstood, often deliberately, and their writings ignored, because it was easier and more comfortable to avoid the disciplines they proposed. Howard's great garden city idea has degenerated, except in Britain, into petunias and the suburban sprawl. Walter Gropius's great concept was discredited in the 1950s, called a cold materialist Functionalism, and considered to be internationally-

minded to a suspicious degree and insensitive to regional nuances.

Many architects then revolted against the moralistic overtones of Bauhaus teaching and the seemingly puritanical ban on ornament. Historical styles crept back, as well as decoration, and false effects for art's sake. Evidence of this phase is available to us wherever we care to look. But in 1965 there is also evidence - though less in Australia than in some parts overseas - that this period of adult delinquency in twentieth century architecture has almost run out its time.

Thus the reappearance of Gropius's definitive statement on the 'New Architecture' which he helped decisively to found could hardly be more timely. Exactly one generation after it first appeared in 1935 his book returns to find the international modern movement which it celebrated in a confused, cynical, unsettled state.

But how confident, morally upright, and hopeful it was then in its youth! And to re-read of it today acts like a tonic. We recapture the assurance and the heroic stance.

The Gropius statement is not long; hardly more than an essay. It is quite personal, starting with a brief explanation of his theory of architecture and going on to

describe the teaching of the Bauhaus school in concept and practice. It finishes with Gropius cantering off downhill on two of his favorite hobby-horses of that time: prefabricated houses and skyscraping flats.

It was written in England, during the short interlude in Gropius's career between his flight from the Nazis and his continuing success in the U.S.A. It often possesses a noble and classical simplicity, and to architects is almost as full of quotations as Shakespeare.

Gropius's famous early buildings are illustrated along the way. Some of them such as the Berlin flats of 1929 are clearly dated to their period by their white box shapes gashed by strip windows. They represent the visual style that sometimes came out of the Bauhaus involuntarily, a purging style, that had few lovers next morning. But others, like the Werkbund Exhibition offices at Cologne of 1914, retain a capacity to excite and delight, and to amaze at the sheer precociousness of their design half a century ago.

The sobering fact is that the newest, most avant-garde, with-it architecture in the most sophisticated centres of construction today (too new indeed to have been more than hinted at here) has great overlaps of character in common with that epochal building by Gropius.

But a topical relevance closer to home is the reminder of the Bauhaus methods in this year in Australia when several institutions of higher learning are groping in the dark for an idea on which to base new school of architecture.

The Bauhaus and the early Continental modern movement which it crystallised has been misrepresented often, but here 30 years ago Gropius answered most of the criticisms. In words which are up to date because the argument is timeless he stresses that rationalization of building is no more important than "the other side: the aesthetic satisfaction of the human soul," that "architecture implies the mastery of space", that "respect for tradition does not mean the complacent toleration of....individual eccentricity....or bygone aesthetic forms". He advocates "realistic" building deriving its architectural significance "solely from the vigore and consequence of its own organic proportions, true to itself, logically transparent and virginal of lies or trivialities..."

No aesthetic argument can hold much water against such remarks and the Bauhaus ethic will surely never die so long as the source of material remains available.

Howard's book is more for the specialist: the townplanner or social historian, and for them it is essential reading.

Yet it is perhaps the least read most influential book of town planning.

Sir Ebenezer Howard (1850 - 1928), the son of a shopkeeper, was an inventor of unsuccessful mechanical gadgets who later turned to the problem of the crowded, sordid city. In this book he describes the physical, financial and administrative design for an ideal satellite town, a town-country rather than a country-town, where beauty and intellectual pursuits could mix, a town planned for the delight as well as the convenience of its citizens, and limited in size by a green belt (he cited Adelaide as a partial example).

In an introduction written in 1945 Lewis Mumford describes his concept and the aeroplane as two equally important inventions at the turn of the century.

Howard lived to see two Garden Cities build near London to his idea: Letchworth and Welwyn, and after World War 2 about 20 new towns were founded in Britain, all essentially based on his concept.

In Australia the idea has fared less successfully. We have tried reserving green belts, but always have allowed them to become cut and tattered. Nevertheless Yallourn, Vic., and Elizabeth, S.A., are Howard towns, and Canberra today would have had his most enthusiastic approval.