

## THE NERVE OF OUR STUDENTS

You may recall that a big architectural convention was held in Melbourne a month ago. Last week another big architectural convention was held in Melbourne. Why so soon?

Well, the first was organised by the professional architects through their royal institute. The second was organised by the students of architecture through their nation-wide association and was done in frank, aggressive competition to the first. The students announced their intention in advance: to go one better than their elders and worsers. And they did.

As a result last week had the most encouraging signs for the future of Australian architecture in many a year.

"Your students are really something," said one of their guests from overseas, the distinguished English architect, Eric Lyons. "They are going to make wonderful architects. No client will be able to resist them."

For some years the architectural student fraternity has been so quiet that one could have believed that the traditional student spirit was dead. There came from the universities no protests, no parodies, no public opinions about the work or the behaviour of the profession. Could students really approve everything being built, the way our cities are developing, the shape of the people's houses? If not, were they too overworked to raise their voices, too cowed, or too preoccupied with transistors?

Whatever caused it, the student silence did nothing to encourage hope

that the coming generation of architects - the first to be trained entirely under the influence of modern architecture - would be especially vigorous, socially aware or artistically adventurous.

Last week the silence was shattered.

The students had viewed the formal professional convention of the previous month without favour. They claimed that it should not have been held during term when they could not attend daytime lectures and discussions. They further claimed that it could have been more serious-minded. And so they planned one of their own "to discuss that which was not being dealt with anywhere else".

The theme they selected for discussion was nothing less basic than the world housing problem of tomorrow, and they invited an all-star international cast.

Eric Lyons, the English guest, is the man who has done more than any other for urban housing design in England. He takes areas with a human density of 250 to the acre - about the same as King's Cross, Sydney - and plans them so that cars, trees and people can all live full lives there.

He fell in love, predictably, with Melbourne's "beautiful iron-fronted houses". Equally predictably he was "absolutely depressed by your suburban sprawl", and impressed by "a wonderful house you've invented . . . . (Mr. Lyons hesitated over the name)" - the treble-fronted. "I'm taking that back to London. I'm sure you'll be glad to lose it."

Patwant Singh, the guest from India, is an expert on similar problems

applied to under developed countries.

Albert Dietz, the guest from the U. S. A. , comes from M. I. T. and is an authority on advanced technologies of building, especially the future uses of plastics.

A more authoritative and better rounded panel of men to discuss this problem could hardly be imagined.

To pay for their expenses and for other activities at the convention the students raised no less than £6, 000.

They also ran a competition among themselves, sponsored by the Australian Gas Association, for the design of a house which exploited all foreseeable technological advances.

Ideas that came forward with the contributed sketch drawings included a town built of cells, or flats, which were built up to form the bulging wall of a dam across a river. This solves several old Australian housing problems with one hit, for each home has built-in water supply, cooling and aquatic sport facilities. One of the two equal-first prize-winners by Tom Marshall, 21, of Melbourne, was ploygonal in plan with a central hub packed with the mechanical equipment. It could be a single house on a normal lot or could be mounted with many others of its own kind on a central supporting column. Mr. Marshall nominated it for the 1980s ('84 perhaps?).

The other equal first, by John Blanshard, 24, of Brisbane, blew up the good old bubble idea to pleasant proportions. It made the house a plastic dome 50 feet in diameter enclosing a section of garden, airconditioned to a permanent spring, in which screens provide the

occupants with areas of cave-like privacy when required.

The most constructive suggestion to come from the convention was the ambitious and rather spectacular one from Mr. Singh. He proposed that Australian architects could do a job in Asia that would be "worth more to Australian prestige than huge amounts of economic aid."

He proposed that the students should organise a "Peace Corps" of housing. Australian architects, who have indeed more experience in this field than most others, could apply their knowledge and imagination to the desperate problems of low-cost housing in under-developed Asian and African countries. The students accepted this challenge and intend, they promise, to investigate means of putting it into action.

But really nothing that happened at the convention was as important as the fact that the convention happened. Australia's architectural students came out of it with greatly increased stature and confidence.

"I am enormously heartened", said Professor Dietz, "by the similarity of students all over the world." He added that we should be proud of ours, for being "alive, amazingly efficient in their arrangements, imaginative, and a bit destructive."

"They had tremendous initiative and cool organisation," added Eric Lyons. "And real nerve, if I may say so."