Announcing the end of the glass box and the birth of

A NEW 3D CITY ARCHITECTURE

This is a sad story, in a way. Solemnizing the end of an era is usually a wistful rite. The era I mean began ten years ago, and had the very best intentions. Yet it fizzled out so weakly, its passing mourned by no one. I refer of course to the inglorious passing of the glass box.

We have seen the end of the clean, anonymous, grey-green office tower, whose image dominated the real estate pages of the press, whose plain, dull walls transformed the Victorian hearts of Australian cities, whose tall, non-committal silhouettes represented the whole of modern architecture to most people up to a year or so ago.

The glass box is out. No more examples of any size or importance will be built. Its age is past and a new era of city building is beginning.

The glass box never really represented the bulk of modern architecture. It was simply a most spectacular and prominent branch of it. The umbrella of modern architecture covers also decidely un-boxlike structures such as Sydney Opera House, not to mention some wierd churches and way-out houses. Yet most of us are inclined to judge both the vitality and the character of building at any stage by what is happening in the gridiron of central city streets, and there the glass box thrived.

The glass box concept began as long ago as 1911 in the Fagus shoe-last factory built by Walter Gropins in Germany. That sensationally prophetic building was a box, and all glass. However, it was only three stories high and horizontally proportioned. The real prototype of all the dozens of glass boxes in Australian cities was the famous 40-storey United Nations Secretariat in New York. That great grey glass slab was designed by an international team just half a century after the Fagus factory. It represented the most advanced technological and artistic expression of building in the post-war period. It has since been copied everywhere, from Athens to Accra, and repeated with variations a hundred times in other parts of New York City.

The glass box in the U.N. image first came to Australia ten years ago. The innovator was Melbourne architect John La Gerch, and his building was a twelve-storey block at 100 Collins Street. It was know for years as 'The Glasshouse'. However, in the proliferation of glasshouses which followed, that name lost its point. This building was followed closely by the I.C.I. Houses in Melbourne and Sydney, by Bates, Smart and McCutcheon.

Ten years is a good spin for any technological or artistic movement in these restless days. During that decade the glass box did its best to make over the busier parts of Sydney and Melbourne in its own image. It had strong influence also in Adelaide and Perth, and was recognised everywhere as a symbol of progress.

Nearly all the distaste, not to say hatred, which the name 'modern architecture' has raised in some conservative breasts has been the direct cause of the glass box. It was publicly condemned for destroying the quaint Victorian charm of our cities by two Governors-General (Slim and de Lisle) who governed during its era. It was called monotonous, dull and unimaginative by many common citizens.

Often it was truly all these things, although in its best examples, like I.C.I. House in Melbourne, it gave us noble monuments which will carry a sense of repose and dignity, and the spirit of the mid-twentieth-century, proudly into the twenty-first one.

The blank glazed walling, however, only rarely found a vehicle as strong or as well sited as I.C.I. House was in Melbourne. More often the glass sheeting was used just as a facade on the one visible end of a city office block crammed into a slit of space between two unbudging neighbours.

In that position it was no more than another fashion like, say, Spanish Mission, and it had to die sometime. Gradually, towards the end of its ten-year spin, it was attacked from two sides. New influences were at work against its glassiness and against its boxiness.

At the beginning the glass wall ran into some shattering practical difficulties. It cracked, leaked, spontaneously disintergrated and fell in hail showers to the pavement, occasionally hitting politicians' wives on the leg. Ironically enough, by the time the physical problems were overcome, the fashionable attraction of glass was almost spent. Metal panels replaced much of the glass. Brick returned to city buildings after banishment since 1900. Even stone crept back between the windows. Gradually the areas of glass contracted.

The first building of the new non-glass era - the first of, predictably, many that will challenge the flimsy, transient appearance of glass - is the Sydney Water Board building, by the architects McConnell, Smith and Johnson. This tall, strong building stands boldly in the new and ever changing Sydney skyline, dark horizontal shadow lines slashed into its warm-white solid mass.

This building has glass, as every office must, but the glass is dark and invisibly recessed some feet behind the exterior walls, which have been designed in prestressed concrete as sunshading and a sort of permanent, massive scaffold for window-cleaning and maintenance.

Strong as the Water Board building is, challenging as it is to the elegant transparency of the glass facades, nevertheless it

is still in form a box, a simple, truly rectilinear container. And the glass box is now to be challenged on the second count also, on its very boxiness. A new style of office building which breaks from the confines of the rectangular urban slice of space is about to appear.

The most spectacular break from rectangles will be Harry Seidler's cylindrical skyscraper on Australia Square, Sydney. But high flights like that are only possible when a big investor combines a number of city splinter properties into one, and thereby permits the redesign of a whole area as a minor exercise in town-planning.

Is it possible to exploit the third dimension, to escape from the box, in an ordinary confined city allotment? It is; and our cities are going to be rescued from any fear of glass box monotony by - of all things - the motor car.

Cars have been accused of choking the life out of cities, and this they certainly will do if we don't watch them. But, in the meantime, methods of accommodating them off the street are responsible for a breakaway from the box.

The multi-storey car park was a new face in the city when it first appeared four or five years ago, but it was still a humble, utilitarian thing. The promise of a new city architectural

style appeared when the multi-storey carpark and an office building combined.

The first effective example of this was the King's Parkade in Little Collins Street, Melbourne. The architect, Peter McIntyre, poised two floors of office space over and slightly back from a five-storey garage. He added a cafe and other amenities at the back and made the whole a complex composition of blocks and hollows which reminded Melbourne that a city building did not necessarily have two blank sides, a plain back and a more fancy front.

The third dimension is successfully exploited again in a building called Total House nearing completion now in Kings Street on the old Savoy Theatre site. Architects Bogle Banfield and Associates have designed here seven storeys of open car park behind rugged plank balustrades. Invisibly supported clear above them floats a superstructure of four floors of office space.

The same architects are doing much the same thing again in an enterprise rejoicing in the name of Downtown Carparks, under construction opposite Myers in Lonsdale Street. Here 900 cars will be accommodated in the base, and five office floors will fly above.

All these designs play as imaginatively as possible on circumscribed sites with the real stuff of architecture: with vigorous modelling of masses and spaces. To help us appreciate where they may ultimately lead us, an exhibition of advanced architectural students' work from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology is illuminating. This show at The Building Centre, 441 Lonsdale Street, displays the models and drawings of six "visionary schemes for the redevelopment of Victoria Market".

That poor old market is at present being replanned, still as a fruit market, by Melbourne City Council, but the official design has not yet been published. The students decided that (as one wrote) "...authorities seem only aware of the specific needs of the present. They should be aware of visionary needs as well".

Thus they replanned the market area for housing, offices, and international trade centre, a traffic terminus, and for various other visionary uses. What was perhaps more significant, most of them revelled in the freedom presented by the opportunity to replan such a big area. They carried the new 3D modelling of city building to satisfyingly extreme ends of visionary design.

One scheme by M. Wirt, M. Hamilton, W. Reynolds and H. Greenwood exemplifies the design process which clearly separates different functions. Their model indicates the now familiar base of car

parking floors, but the several office blocks above are more separated and levitated than ever. They span between the strong concrete trees of a sparse forest of lifts and services towers.

Other more substantial and sober means of breaking away from the glass box will be discovered in the next few years.

Now, the question which faces us, especially those of us who criticised the monotony of the box, is whether we should cheer or fear the new prospect.

One remarkable quality of the glass box, and one which endeared it to a booming building industry, was that it took hardly any time or talent to design. The box shape was a direct result of the lot size and certain building regulations, such as the relevant height limit. The glass wall could come straight out of a trade catalogue. This meant that the poorest talents could design a presentable building just by restraining themselves from adding anything distasteful around the entrance door.

The new accent on form and mass introduces the need for something more than an absence of bad taste. It calls for a sculptural feeling for space, a sense for proportions, and an element of visionary drive. It cries out for architectural talent. Its nature does not permit it to hide or disguise bad design. It is therefore incomparably more exciting than the box, and infinitely more dangerous.