

The post-war period saw a demand for new architecture, although the idea was old, and the Australian skyline was pierced by soaring

sheets of glass. But now, writes **ROBIN BOYD**, change has come again,

bringing the chance to break away from rectangular boredom. And for this, he says, you can thank the motor car.

Death notice

THE END OF THE GLASS BOX

THIS is a sad story, in a way. Solemnising 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 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 decidedly un-boxlike structures such as Sydney Opera House, not to mention some weird 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 Gropius in Germany. That sensationally prophetic building was a box, and all glass.

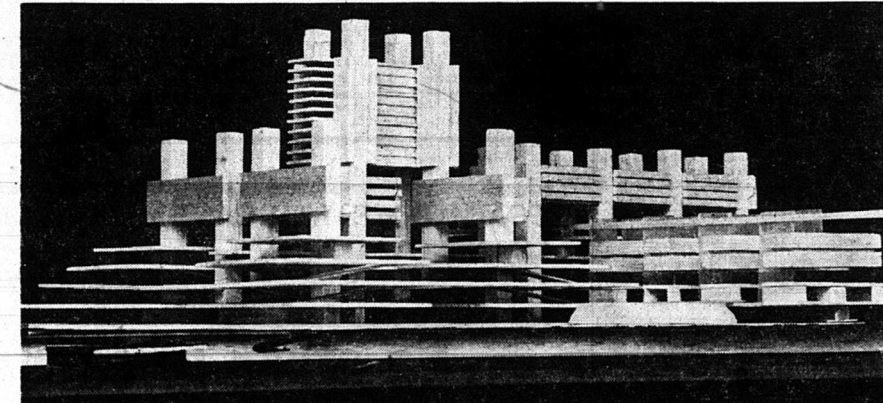
Prototype

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 UN image first came to Australia ten years ago. The innovator was Melbourne architect, John La Gerch, and his building was a 12-storey block at 100 Collins Street.

It was known 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 ICI 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 (Slime 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 ICI House in Melbourne, it gave us noble monuments which will carry a sense of repose and dignity, and the spirit of the mid-20th century, proudly into the 21st one.

The blank glazed walling, however, only rarely found a vehicle as strong or as well suited as ICI 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 neighbors.

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 disintegrated 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 began replacing much of the glass. Brick returned to city buildings after banishment since 1900. Even stone crept back between the windows. Steadily the areas of glass contracted.

The first building of the new non-glass era—the first, 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 clashed into its warm-white solid mass.

Scaffold

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 pre-stressed 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

Three-dimensional city architecture: a vision of Melbourne's Victoria Market 20 years from now, by Wirt, Hamilton, Reynolds and Greenwood, students of the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. TOP: The Shell Building in Melbourne.

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 form and 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 possible only 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.

It is possible to exploit the third dimension, to escape from the box, in an ordinary confined city allotment 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 car park and an office building combined.

The first effective example of this was the King's Parkade in

Birth notice

A NEW 3-D STYLE FOR A CITY

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, an international trade centre, a traffic terminus, and for various other visionary uses. What was perhaps more significant, most of them revealed 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 or a sparse forest of lifts and services towers.

Question

Other more substantial and sober means of breaking away from the glass box undoubtedly 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.

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 standard catalogue. This meant that architects 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.

Vigorous

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