

Have you ever tried to define the character of our city?

If we were living in some other town the question might never arise. It would not be difficult or necessary to analyse again the character of London or Paris, for their very names convey an atmosphere as well as a place on the globe.

Sydney has a transparent, sun-filled, sports-clothed character which demands no deeper examination. Perth is primarily a spectacle of nature, like Edinburgh or Salzburg. Many of the world's most prominent, beautiful cities are permeated by a character which stems from some natural contrast of the site, or some consistency in the man-made development.

But Melbourne is not so easily described. It is without strong contrasts - in its vegetation, between its seasons, or from its highest land to the bayside plains. And it is certainly without consistency in its man-made embellishments.

So indeed you may say, as many people do, that it has no character worth considering. As a matter of fact, to put oneself in praise of Melbourne these days is to put oneself on the defensive. A lot of civic pride has flaked away, with paint these last few years of building inactivity within the city's heart.

But if you should be one who feels that there is nothing of beauty in Melbourne, it must be that you have not recently passed along Alexandra Avenue in the evening as the lights go on or in the comparatively early morning when the yellow sun is lighting the sides of the grey silhouettes across the river. Or stood among the twisting ti-tree on a Peninsula cliff on any still evening when Port Phillip is a vast grey sheet of glass spotted by little boats too distant for definition of the men within though it seems you can hear their voices across the silence. Or driven over the narrow bouncing roads through the orchard country to the east between the slate-colored hills and the ridiculous but friendly fringe of the outer suburbs. Or kicked through the leaves, last Autumn, in more cultivated parks than you could find near the centre of any two other cities of comparable size combined.

And if you consider that Melbourne is without architectural interest it must be that you have not recently passed any of the few simple little Regency cuttings which the early colonists planted here. Or examined some of the great grey stucco Baroque mansions of the Boom, with their thick dressings of indigestible ornament from every part of the world. Or traced out some of the first steps of twentieth century architecture taken here by men of vision and enterprise while the rest of Australia slept. Or investigated the mild but unmistakable revival of creative architecture which is under way at present.

It is not convenient here to refer to something which is painfully apparent to many of us - that is, the danger we are in of losing most of Melbourne's best features: the thoughtless and sometimes wanton destruction of our native and old cultured trees, the gradual encroachment on our parks, the suburban blight on so much of our best neighboring countryside. Still wanting to speak in praise, the best one can say when faced with these sad things is that there is a considerable number of people who are active in opposition, who are trying to revive the civic enthusiasm which once surged Melbourne ahead.

It often seems that a general middle-aged lethargy rests prematurely on our city. We are building more than ever, but most of our activity is divided - divided into little separate houses built without reference to or care for the neighbor or the neighborhood. This is not healthy growth of a city. It is a sort of fungus development upon an organism which ceased general growth some years ago.

No, it can't be said that this present era of production of lots of little houses without adequate roads or services or any of the other civilized public utilities is one of the great periods of the city.

Melbourne's development has been in a succession of waves, like that of any other city except that our waves have been more frequent and the whole thing has happened so quickly.

We are unfortunately in a trough between waves at the moment.

Somehow each wave threw to the top one or two men of building with outstanding imagination and creative ability. These men lead in each period some new movement in architectural design, all of which, mixed together now, form the multi-colored fabric of our town. But important through these men - these individual artists - were, they could have achieved nothing if the wave of popular feeling had not been there to carry them. They anticipated and interpreted in stone and bricks the popular aspirations of the times.

There was, for instance, Robert Russell, the surveyor sent here in 1836 to chart the shores of Port Phillip and trace the course of the rivers. When he arrived he found the horses had not been sent so he could not fulfill his commission, but he planned the square mile of our city streets while waiting, and stayed on, after Hoddle took over his work, to build our first serious architecture. Old St. James Cathedral, now in King Street, was his work; a finely proportioned sensitive building and one of the very few we have left in the Classic tradition of New South Wales' Old Colonial architecture. It was not easy for him to build with quality in the tough young Colony which was then Melbourne. There were no real craftsmen to help him, not even a man who could carve the foundation inscription; so he had it written on parchment and lodged in a wall cavity. But Russell, like the men behind him, had faith in the town then being founded on the muddy hillocks.

As the streets of the square mile began to fill with buildings, the new architectural fashion of the Gothic Revival arrived from England.

It was something more than a fashionable style to the colonists. It was also a link with England. Charles Laing was one of the leading architects now. He built St. Peter's on Eastern Hill and many comparatively simple, restrained houses with tall gables of bluestone and carved bargeboards.

Then the gold was found. The Gothic Revival reached a climax with the construction of St. Patrick's cathedral in 1858, the work of the most prominent men of the day: William Wardell, government architect, designer of many banks and, outstandingly, Government house.

These followed a period of building which makes our efforts today, a century later, seem pale and amateurish. Classic and Gothic designs competed for public favour. "The Battle of the Styles" they called it, and on what a scale it was fought. What buildings the generation after the gold rush handed down to us. The Treasury and the Royal Mint - scholarly, restrained and polished, in the high Renaissance manner. Parliament House and the Law Courts - ponderous and over-elaborate but of a hearty generosity of conception which would terrify any authority if it was suggested today.

And then the "Boom" of the eighties, with its great ornate mansions and Italian mannerisms: and the real beginning of Melbourne's now famous "sprawl" with the rapid growth of railway lines and new suburbs; the cast iron columns and lacework on verandahs; and the great exhibitions when we proudly showed the world how magnificently vulgar we could be.

After this highest of all waves, Melbourne sank into the economic depression of the nineties. When it began to rise again, the architects had a new style ready, as always. It was the "Queen Anne" - a hybrid red style of bricks and tiles and brown paint which lingers on even today. And with it were some of the first deliberate manifestations of "Australian" flavor in decoration.

Around the turn of the century there were gumleaf and kangaroo ornaments in profusion to echo the national spirit of Federation.

The architectural waves of the twentieth century were more complex. Most obvious were the superficial ripples - perhaps splashes is the better term - of further fashions: Californian Bungalow Style, Spanish Mission, the Jazzy Moderne, Tudor and so on. But underneath, swelling up steadily and gathering force for an inevitable surge some day, was the movement for a rational, logical, sensible architecture expressive of this century. It started before World War I, with men such as Robert Haddon and Harold Desbrowe Annear - who built with plain walls and free, open plans and sometimes with flat roofs even then, seeking always simplicity in construction and beauty through the expression of function.

It was strengthened by a great American, Walter Burley Griffin, who worked here for 14 years until 1929 and gave us the Capitol Theatre, Newman College at the University and numerous smaller buildings in which Melbourne gained for the first time some idea of the sheer excitement of original, imaginative architecture freed from the history book.

This movement grew stronger after the depression when a few young architectural firms such as Newton and Grounds built, in sharp contrast to the prevailing Mission and Tudor styles, a number of houses and flats of striking simplicity and yet with great charm. The "functionalist" idea grew until the war, by which time it was accepted for big buildings such as the Melbourne Hospital, by Stephenson and Turner; and at the same time was moulded imaginatively to produce buildings of strong character such as the block of flats on the Boulevard near Como Park by Roy Grounds. That period between the depression and the war, which nurtured this new honest simplicity in the popular approach to building, was the nearest thing to a great period of architecture in this century.

Finally, there is the present phase of cottage construction. Everything - hospitals, industry, transport, drainage, entertainment, culture - everything waits for housing. We don't question this policy which is in such strong contrast to the Continental attitude.

The European says: "Why make my house look fine? Only I can see it. Why not build fine theatres and stadia? Everyone can enjoy them".

The Australian says "Let me make my house fine while the going's good. The public buildings can look after themselves."

This was not our policy in some of those earlier periods I have mentioned. There was a happy medium between these attitudes in the past: individual home-consciousness combined with keen pride of city and a more genuine community spirit. What is the difference now? Can it be just that they had faith in the future?

We are at present as I said in a trough between the waves of progress. But this sort of dispirited inaction cannot last forever. Soon we must feel the current stirring more strongly beneath our feet, we'll be conscious of a mounting energy all round us and then up we'll bounce on a new wave of enthusiasm and our city will ride on again to new achievements.