

CHURCHES GET CURIUSER AND CURIUSER

Something uncommonly curious has been happening in architecture, and nowhere more than in ecclesiastical architecture.

As you must have noticed, church building has been getting less and less inhibited over the last decade or so, ~~and~~ this movement has now reached a merry climax.

In Mareeba, Queensland, a new church has so many gay and enticing decorative devices - its very walls a gorgeous grillwork - that it might be mistaken for a dance palace or a poker-machine club. The denomination is Methodist.

On the Ballarat Road out of Melbourne another new church is roofed by a sort of eight-pointed star in plan. Its wide eaves zig-zag round it, pierced through in places and trimmed with red paint. If all this sounds a little reserved, even gloomy, the structure is further enlivened by pink bricks and yellow and green windows.

No wandering intending worshipper would be likely to be tempted to try the doors of such gay and abandoned establishments, but for the presence of clear signs in black and white which assure him that they are in fact churches.

But now consider a new building in New Zealand. Its roof springs from a low stone base and is pitched as high as a

steeple - rising no less than 72 feet. Dormer windows which break its sides echo the soaring pitch and reinforce its aspiring emphasis, each apex pointing the way to Heaven. Here at last the weary intending worshipper might feel his pilgrimage was about to end.

But the building is a school library - the Dilworth School at Auckland.

These contrasts would surely have delighted the heart of Lewis Carroll and might have seemed perfectly reasonable to Alice. Too bad that they lived at a time when popular architecture was comparatively sane and indulged in nothing much madder than an excess of ornament.

The significant thing about the examples cited - which of course represent dozens of others - is not a matter of design. Such buildings often are put together with high competence. It is not a matter of aesthetics. Some undoubtedly appear attractive, even beautiful, to many eyes. But all that is rather beside the point; The point being their dumbfounding irrelevance.

Ornament may be the last resort of a barren architecture, but at least it has some justification if it is used to build up atmosphere, in the theatrical sense, appropriate to the use of the building, appropriate to the human

emotional content of the building. Ornament used this way has nothing to do with the serious art of architecture - which is concerned with form and space - but at least it is not impertinent.

But nervous, jazzy decorative effects are as inappropriate to a church as a spurious transcendental effect is to a school.

We must marvel at the distance that modern architecture has travelled since the Functionalist days. Do you remember way back a year or two when some people used to complain about all the unimaginative glass boxes? Where are the plain boxes now?

What has happened is that popular or routine architecture, having been liberated from the dead styles of history by the cleansing action of Functionalism, and then having tired of Functionalism, is left with no discipline, no ideals and no guiding light. All it has is an unauthorised licence to try anything once.

And lately the non-architects, the clients of architects, have become aware of the theatrical potential of free-for-all architecture, and have been asking for a share of it to advertise some interest of their own, not necessarily related to users' emotional response to the building.

For instance, although the internal human function of churches has not changed in a great number of years, the external advertising function has grown in importance as the Church has recognized reluctantly a need to advertise - to recommend itself to youth by quite unsubtle means.

Architecture without artistic discipline and a clientele with a need to advertise is an explosive mixture. The churches undoubtedly have been carried much further than they wished to go, but they are not the only ones to lose their dignity. The library which looks like a church is just as ridiculous. Or the bank that looks like a bowling alley.

It is not idealistic to condemn these wildly inappropriate things, for the next phase after the licentious one is already on the way. The architectural lead is hesidantly returning to the discipline of rational construction and functional planning. But even more relevantly, it is returning to the idea that the theatrical potential of architecture should be exercised, if not with restraint, at least with pertinence.

In short a church should look like a church. But not just by being Gothic - the style of the great cathedrals. We have grown out of evocative imitation. A modern church - as most

people nowadays believe - should look like a church in modern terms: like a place where 20th-century people might feel at home when worshipping, when they are buying something more fundamental than detergents or a night out.

They do not necessarily want dim light and a soaring roof, but they might be entitled to expect an atmosphere of dignity and repose, an honest simplicity in the structure, some evidence of the pattern of nature rather than the patterns of Laminex.

There is one work for it. In a church building, more than in any other kind of building, we might be entitled to expect that rarest quality in architecture: sincerity.