

CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN CHURCHES

Striking, charming, dramatic - such words spill easily over this folio of photographs of contemporary Australian churches. Are such words enough?

Modern architecture in its early days in Europe was fairly circumspect when it turned to churches. On all other occasions it was iconoclastic in its attitude to conventions of proportion and taste, and to the rules of design; and it was revolutionary in practice. Houses, universities, secular buildings of all kinds, kicked over as many traces of tradition as possible. And yet no-one proposed a Machine for Worshipping In.

During the first quarter of the twentieth century the most advanced churches, like Auguste Perret's Notre Dame Du Raincy of 1923, retained nave, apse, transept, clerestory, stained glass, sometimes even the lancet arch and the buttress, and were content merely to omit the mediaeval details from ferro-concrete walls. In the 'thirties, when Sweden made her great contribution to modern architecture, the Gothic forms were dropped in favour of a more folksy tradition. Several charming small churches in the converted-country-barn style were built in Scandinavia and Switzerland of natural wood, orange brick,

white paint and sunshine. In the late 'forties and early 'fifties a more sophisticated style, which was in some regards a combination of those earlier two, was developed in the U.S.A.. It was in modern laminated wood, but the forms evoked the past. Huge timber supports were inclined to arch gracefully as they soared upwards to meet under a lofty pointed roof. The effects were reminiscent of Gothic vaulting but at the same time warmer, more intimate, up to date and human. After the middle of the century the ecclesiastical architectural scene in America and Europe became considerably confused. Concrete shells took unexpected curves and some queer fish shapes appeared.

Australia was not noticeably impressed by any of the earlier moves. One or two unorthodox architects like Payne in Brisbane and Haddon in Melbourne produced two or three nonconformist churches before 1920. These were comparatively free of ornament and were done in a simplified gabled form. Perhaps by coincidence they were all Presbyterian. Architecturally, however, they were far apart from the main stream. Even when the modern movement began to be known and tolerated in this country in the late 'thirties, a sort of gentleman's agreement remained: hands off religion. The churches stayed staunchly Gothic or stolidly brickish until the beginning of the building boom of the middle nineteen-fifties. Then, all of a sudden, the international change of attitude burst upon us.

At this time a new generation of churchmen began to take control of many church building programmes. Most of these had had the smooth edges of their calling tousled a little by life in the Services. All of them had grown up in a generation that came to consider modern architecture fairly normal, racy but not really wicked. Most of them were faced with declining congregations and the need to find a vital image (if one may use a term now practically appropriated by the Public Relations profession) to appeal to young people. Suddenly there could be no delay or doubt: Gothic must go.

In no time the new churches which sprang up among the new villas of the middle suburbs adopted the Contemporary approach. Walls broke free from cruciform and rectangular plans and were zig-zagged, curved, or tilted off vertical. Traditional ornament was replaced by patterns of projecting bricks or metal grilles, stained glass became abstract. Spires were detached from the body of the church and rose as spidery metal needles.

This was a popular architectural language. It was usually handled with more taste and discretion than when used in commercial building, but the result was often dangerously close to the same thing. The whole venture was fraught with danger because the motivation was more frequently frankly outer-directed: the urge to attract newcomers. There was little indication of any inner-directed desire to produce the most noble possible place of worship.

A few of the new churches can be described by no word but vulgar, for they clearly aim to appeal to the flashiest fashionable taste. Many others, though still in the same style, deserve serious consideration because they are graced with imagination and some subtlety and a genuine desire to express in modern terms something of the emotional quality found in ancient religious monuments. Many are excellent, restrained examples of the style which we must recognise as Australian High Contemporary.

Yet it is the style itself that must be questioned in a church. At the best it is bland, sophisticated, smooth as a subtle advertisement, designed to catch, delight, and entertain the eye; but nothing more. Religion means many different things to different men, yet for Catholic, Protestant or Jew - all of whom have adopted the Contemporary with equal enthusiasm - at the root it involves surely no less than the most fundamental emotion. It must represent to the worshipper ultimate truth and beauty, and a soul stripped bare of social sham. Yet as often as not the Contemporary idiom gives him for a symbol the cross made into a piece of smart decoration, perhaps in Black Bean with satin silver insert strip.

Modern architecture once stood for the unvarnished truth, and a modern church that represents a search for transcendent

beauty through simplicity is still a possibility. I think it can be detected in one of the churches illustrated here, but it is hard to find anywhere.

Of course it may be that several or all of these charming photographs by Mark Strizic will evoke in the reader something deeper than a visual response to pictorial beauty; if that could be possible, my apologies; I must be quite wrong.
