

The State of Australian Architecture
(for S M H Architecture Convention feature)

Robin Boyd

On a stimulating occasion like an architectural convention it is not difficult to be carried away and say that the state of architecture in Australia is better than ever.

And this is a thoroughly acceptable statement if by 'ever' one means the generation just past: the three fairly flat decades between the Depression and the end of post-war reconstruction. Architecture now certainly is better than it was then.

It should be taken for granted that in optimistic statements of this sort we overlook, as a matter of convention, such architects as Greenway, Blackett, Wardell and the other 19th century giants, as well as the early colonists who built the Victorian Baroque public palaces of the other state capitals with such confidence, practically in the middle of wild bush.

And it is necessary to forget the few pioneers of modern architecture who fought so hard against conservatism a generation ago, to make Australia safe for the Opera House.

Also it is important to define the word 'architecture'. When making appraisals of this sort the term is normally confined by common consent to the more prominent public monuments, the biggest commercial buildings and the more precious houses. One ignores such things as the villa sprawl, the pink brick flats done in Diagonal Style, the committee-designed Espresso Style outer-suburban churches, the mayhem of the shopping streets. In those kinds of popular development the state of Australian building is exceedingly bad - but not, one must say defensively, worse than that of any other newly-rich country.

However, the term 'architecture' for our present purposes excludes that sort of amateur non-design, as well as entirely commercial or industrial building. In short, architecture can be defined as the work of properly registered architects when they are really trying.

With these qualifications, it's true that the state of Australian architecture is healthy. We have more and bigger architectural schools, with an output of scores of capable graduates annually. The average standard of work is higher, with fewer excesses of any sort. The professional climate is more alert and progressive. Prominent buildings enjoy more intelligent discussion, more vigorous and informed criticism, more interest from the man in the street. For the first time we have a profession journal, Architecture in Australia, that can stand up in any company.

Although the best buildings are still scattered wide, and separated by miles of carelessness, it is getting easier to find a presentable path between them. Gathering together a collection of first-class architectural photographs for an exhibition is no longer a marathon task.

The state of Australian architecture is better than - let us say - ever this century.

And if this can be agreed, should architects be congratulating themselves and spending this Convention in Sydney patting their colleagues on the back? They shouldn't be; and undoubtedly they won't be.

For architecture is better simply because Australia is better. Thanks to many things, including our own little industrial revolution, Australian endeavour in many creative fields is now

vital again. Our architecture has improved since 1945 in exactly the same proportion as our painting, our typography, acting, advertising, clothing and hairdressing have improved.

Even the huge, horrible field of popular non-design (not to be considered as architecture by definition, as explained above) is really improving. Consider the change in wayside accommodation: the passing of the brown, fly-filled country-pub bedroom with its floral china-ware and dim central light globe. We may not always applaud the design of the motel bedroom that has replaced the pub bedroom. Its decorative scheme of striated pink and pale green wallboards and random vinyl with black iron trim probably was taken by the local builder piecemeal from a 1949 edition of American Home.

Nevertheless the ordinary small motel room is unquestionably an enormous improvement on the ordinary old small hotel room in purely physical terms. The facts that it has its own self-contained toilet facilities and its light reflectors fixed above the bedhead are no credit to its designer. They simply go to show that Australians are nicer people to live with now. They now demand the facilities to take a long hot shower every day. They actually want to read in bed.

The fact that most new offices, restaurants, and many homes are infinitely more comfortable in hot or cold weather does not mean that all who design Australian buildings have at last come to grips with our climate and are planning buildings which welcome the sun when it is wanted and banish it when it misbehaves. The more equable indoor temperatures simply show that Australians, like most prosperous people in the world, are demanding more creature comforts, and technology is meeting them halfway by providing cheaper air-conditioning and central heating.

In various other similar ways new materials and methods are constantly raising the physical standards. But what of the artistic and creative standards of the comparatively small proportion of new buildings that can claim to be serious architecture? Does the cultural time-lag still operate?

In the nineteenth century the passage of artistic ideas and attitudes from the northern hemisphere to Australia took about five times as long as the passage of technological methods. The actual time taken for the voyage varied according to the mood of the day. In excited times, like the gold rush, reception for new ideas was good and new concepts appeared here within a few years.

However, as a rule of thumb one could say that the time-lag last century was fifteen years. Early this century it dropped to ten, and between the wars it declined to about six years.

An historian with mathematical talent has yet to calculate the exact cultural formula, but no doubt when he does Australian conservatism at any time will be capable of measurement: something like the square of the travelling time, plus K.

K would represent our physical isolation, which remains a constant even when supersonic planes can bring Chelsea, Greenwich Village and King's Cross within an hour or two of each other, even while the imported art journals get fatter and richer in information month by month.

The Australian artist in any field still misses the more intimate, personal contact with any considerable body of opinion in his own field, and he hears of new currents of thought second-hand, when they are no longer so exciting or stimulating.

Thus the time-lag still operates on the creative level. Some new movements, such as the Perpendicular Prettiness style introduced recently by the Japanese-American Yamasaki, have not been seen here at all.

But does this matter? On the contrary, we may be thankful that there are still some branches of creative activity that are not instantly internationalised by the mass media, and that we are not always caught between the higher pressures of fashion.

Precisely because of the isolation a number of talented Australian architects are doing more creative work, thinking quite originally from the ground up. Their design is more relaxed and sensible than it might be because of the absence of the fevered kind of avant-gardism that forces many a young architect in more sophisticated parts of the world into striking some uncomfortable attitude whether he likes it or not.

While we are constantly, and rightly, encouraging every move to break down our isolation, it is in practice the one thing that stops our serious architecture from being entirely swamped, like television and popular reading, by ideas already fully developed across the Pacific.

Because of the isolation it is still just possible for us to develop a regional style, reflecting the realities of life in this corner of the globe. And we have now, perhaps for the first time, a sufficient number of trained architects, and high enough popular standards, to make possible the development of this regional style - the Australian style that has been always on the verge of realisation but has never come.

But in the less serious branches of architecture the isolation is fast breaking down. Some of our keenest businessmen inevitably now look to America for their architecture, as they look to it for all other profitable processes. Half a dozen of this nation's biggest recent buildings are thus anonymous, homeless-looking giants. They were designed in the U.S.A. by superlatively efficient architectural factories.

So the question is: will we be able to develop that long-promised Australian style before all national styles are unified by some sort of I.B.M. card-system process of design?
