

ARCHITECTURE IN MELBOURNE

Robin Boyd, Melbourne Architect and Senior Lecturer in design at the University of Melbourne.

[Architecture has been in the news lately, here in Melbourne.

[Last week a National Architectural Convention was held, and this week an exhibition of a "Century of Architecture" in this state is running at the National Gallery.

[The convention attracted over a hundred visitors from other states and from overseas and was attended by hundreds of our own architects. It was the first to be held in Australia and was valuable, primarily, for the scope it gave for the interchange of ideas among our own and visiting architects.

[And the interesting thing was this: we all seemed to agree on essential points. It became clear that the general problems of building today are very similar everywhere and that architects have reached independently very similar proposals for tackling them.

[Our major problem in Melbourne, as in most other parts of the world, is a housing problem. We are building 15,000 ^{houses} a year, but that is still not enough. The first step towards solving this problem is obvious, to build more, and to this end the theme of the convention was taken as "Productivity" - how to increase production in the building industry.

[We heard numerous suggestions, and most were self-critical. Architects realise that they must face the fact that working hours in Australia are short and that, with full employment, tradesmen on the job do not feel inclined to force themselves to undue efforts.

[Architects agreed to tackle the problem from the top rather than the bottom. They say that increased production will result ~~from~~ ^{by} increasing efficiency of organization at the highest level - starting in their own offices.

[They will concentrate on business organization perhaps more than in the past - keeping a steady flow of materials and instructions to the site so that all labour available is most efficiently used.

[But Melbourne's problems are not solved only by increased production. As well as new houses we need new places to put them. Since the war we have been spreading at a great rate.

[Today, with a population of about $1\frac{1}{4}$ million, we have one of the biggest cities in the world - in area. In some directions you can travel twenty miles from the city without leaving the suburbs.

[Flats are not popular here - though strangely enough some of our most progressive buildings are in this class. Generally we prefer a separate house in a private garden, and in fact there are more of these than in any other part of the world in proportion to population. And over half of them are owned by the occupiers.

[But this extension of largely single storey houses across miles of country around our city's heart has brought other problems - mainly the difficulty of keeping up the roads, sewerage and electric supplies.

[So the second question tackled by architects was dispersal. A city plan for Melbourne has been in preparation for some time. When it is made law, architects and planners hope that a stop will be called to the city's sprawl and that construction of satellite towns will begin.

[Our concentration on the private house naturally enough has resulted in the development of this class of building to a high standard.

[We do not pretend that every one of the thousands of houses built each year is an architectural gem, but we believe that we do produce some of the best houses in the world, among the mediocre majority.

[House building is assisted by government. About 15 per cent are built outright by the State Housing Commission. Many more are built on Government loans. But in the long run most are organised by the owners themselves. This means that there is little uniformity and that individual taste is free to run riot, or to produce, on occasion, fine examples of the art of architecture.

[Houses and hospitals are the two fields of architecture most advanced in Melbourne. In these fields we now believe that we are developing fairly vigorous and original qualities. The current exhibition of our progress over a century helps to confirm this belief. It shows how we followed Europe's lead during our first half century of responsible government and then, about 1900, began to develop a style of our own - suited to our own climate and materials, but ^{later} strongly based on the international modern movement in architecture.

[Our modern houses use our local woods. We like great sheets of glass facing north to catch all the sun of our comparatively mild climate. We are beginning to use more experimentation and invention in the use of colour, textures and new structural methods.

[Today there are many houses in Melbourne which are worthy achievements in architecture. That is, they have something more than big windows and sun terraces and convenient plans with lots of cupboards. They have as well an original, imaginative visual quality which makes them a constant and lasting joy to their occupiers.

[Australian ideas on architecture will soon spread beyond our own shores. For hundreds of Asian students are studying at our architectural colleges. At the School of Architecture at the University of Melbourne, about 40 per cent. of the intake of new students every year are visitors from Asian countries. Also, about ten per cent. are from Europe. It is probably the most cosmopolitan (and under Professor Brian Lewis, one of the happiest) schools of architecture in the world.

[While we do not attempt to inculcate any ideas of an "Australian" national architecture in students, something of the Australian architectural approach doubtless seeps into the course, and our many Asian students may carry home with them some of our ways.

[All we try to teach everyone, however, is how to build logically and imaginatively wherever they live, whatever their materials. And as more and more designers follow these principles, the architecture of Australia and that of her neighbouring countries will grow more akin.