SKYLINE AND HOUSES

Standing on a nature strip in the shade of the electric wires on a certain inner-suburban hill in Melbourne I can see a little of every important kind of development that characterises modern Australia.

Away to the north across a dark green mile of the Botanic Gardens the city looks rather beautiful, and even younger than its 128 years. The youthfulness is explained by the fact that practically all the buildings visible at this distance are new ones, the tall commercial poppies that now, six years after the lifting of building height limits, compete with the cathedral spires and the big exhibition dome of the nineteenth century. The comparative beauty is explained by a slight smog or summer morning mist that merges the new buildings' smart pinks, aquas and ochres into a medium grey. Even the sky-blue panels of the new American tourist hotel look sky-grey, and the lettering on its featured ribbed roof screen above the zig-zag parapet is too distant to be seen.

From experience at close quarters one knows that, though some of these are fine, clean and comfortable buildings, most are no more than pretty ordinary representatives of international modern commercial architecture. They have metal grids of different proportions and glass panels of different colours and foyers featuring mosaic murals or tropical plants, and nothing to say except a fairly diffident: "Look at me". But at this distance their little differences are lost. The good and the mediocre mix, and all look as such buildings were first intended to look: efficient, impersonal, well-spaced towers climbing into the sunlight. They leave below at knee level an undergrowth of shopping windows, facade patterns, fluorescent lettering, textures, cutouts and rainbow colours.

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A better impression of the artistic level of the mess from which the skyscrapers escape is given by a building nearing completion beside me on this hill. It is a block of flats, a kind of building that began invading the inner suburbs in strength about six years ago. It is made largely of salmon-coloured bricks, although a big panel of charcoal-coloured perforated concrete blocks climbs the six storeys in the centre of its street facade, and panels of river pebbles set in brown concrete like nut-milk chocolate are inserted under every landscape window. There is also a copper cut-out mural by the entrance door and a signboard on the street crying in twelve-inch red letters "O-Y-O". This is Melbourne real-estate language, not understood even in neighbouring states, meaning: "own your own" - that is, each of these flats will be sold separately, not rented. The penthouse whose pergola in blended pastel tints can be seen floating over all was sold last month for £40,000, they say, to a sociable widow.

The land which blocks of flats such as this occupy was once some part of the grounds of one of the big two-storey Italianate mansions that took possession of these rich river banks in the boom years of last century. The gold colonists who built their castles here sprinkled their lawns nostalgically with English trees, and now in the flat boom giant oaks and poplars have been chopped down by the dozen to clear the way for the salmon bricks. No Australian trees have been removed, but only because the last natural gum or wattle went fifty years ago.

Most of the big houses also have gone now. The few that are left are occupied by institutions. But sometimes, when a sliver of land is too small to interest the flat-builders, a modern variation of the old private living pattern returns. The old symbol of Australian democracy creeps in from the outer suburbs and a new single house of a single storey is

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built. There is one of these on the other side of the street from the O-Y-O flats, built a year or two ago.

Not much of it can be seen from the outside; only the edge of a flat roof above a grey brick wall. Probably in anticipation of the high flats opposite, this house withdrew into itself from the beginning, and lives its own life around a semi-enclosed courtyard where one of the old colonial trees was preserved and now grows through the flagstones by a swimming pool.

The inarticulate but competent skyscrapers, the impossible O-Y-O, and the quiet house, represent merely three familiar kinds of Australian building. In what remains of 1200 words how can I begin to describe the dozens of other kinds in the fairground of modern Australian architecture? There are American bowling alleys and European Orthodox cathedrals, grandiose shopping centres and flimsy, almost temporary-looking banks, espresso-style churches and classically simple coffee lounges, and the uncompleted great monuments of Sydney's Opera House and Melbourne's National Gallery which are awaited so hopefully, while reservedly.

And yet, despite the wildly undisciplined variety, it might be reasonable to say that all the building activity of Australia could be contained, architecturally speaking, within a triangle represented by those three extremely different kinds of building visible from this hill. One would know everything worth knowing about Australian architecture, and much about her artistic and social development as well, if one understood the degree of technical proficiency in the skyscraping offices, the depths to which cynical exploitation of vulgar taste will go in the O-Y-O, and the artistic character of the sensitive house.

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This house is by no means typical of suburban villa development, which also can be seen from here scrambling over the horizon to the east on its twenty-mile sprawl to the hills. Yet the house is not a lonely type; it is quite characteristic of the more serious new architecture of Australia. In this a high appreciation of creature comforts is interpreted now with a new confidence and strength in design.

No-one would claim that the manner of building and the mood of this design are uniquely Australian. There are hints here of many outside influences: a little from the Pacific-Japanese and Californian - as well as the usual Atlantic influences. Still, the overall flavour could not be named after any other country. For a number of years now the critics have been watshing to see which way serious Australian architects would jump when faced with the split in the International Style. Would they follow the fashionable brutalism that sometimes thrives in Europe, as the Japanese, for example, have done? Or would they be seduced by the pretty romanticism of the even smarter architects of the U.S.A., as seemed more likely?

The happy answer to this question is that for the moment our isolation still seems to be working to good effect. The mood of most progressive architects of Australia is reassuringly balanced. Modern design is moving along nicely at a steady pace, not at all far from the lines originally projected by the modern pioneers half a century ago. The results may have lost the fun of the experimental work in the revolutionary days after the last war, but what comes out is often good, conscientious architecture; not fashionable, doctrinaire, or self-consciously new.

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The form of the building is usually strongly diagrammatic, the test for which is that one can give an accurate description of it in a few words. A verandah of some sort is normal and an internal courtyard seems practically obligatory. The sunlight is broken with many patches of shade. The colours are earthy. The material most favoured is timber, but almost anything is acceptable if it is in the naked state. The budgets are low. The details are uncomplicated and would do anything to avoid looking clever.

Architecture of this kind is to be found not only in houses, where one might expect unrushed and single-minded devotion to an idea, but also in smaller commercial and public buildings, and even on accidental occasions in the usually frenzied shelters for bowling alleys or behind the screaming neon of a motel.

This is the serious architectural mood of Australia in 1963. It looks strong enough and immune to fashion, but of course one can never be sure. If (a big if) it grows in quantity without declining in quality one might be able to call it the Australian style one day.