

WHAT HAPPENED TO TASTE ?

There may be a sound of nostalgia in that title, a suggestion that taste was a good and gentle thing that has been chopped down by insensitive ^{antitheses} modern developers, like trees that run foul of overhead wires.

I didn't mean the title like that. Taste is not necessarily a good thing. Exactly one generation ago, 30 years ago, when the modern movement in architecture and design was first appearing in Melbourne (at that time we were years ahead of Sydney in these matters) the biggest obstacle to good design was taste - the conventional taste of people who did not commission ^{the few} modern architects to do their buildings, & the taste the municipal authorities who found false reasons for raising legalistic objections to ^{support} an illegal design censorship which they openly practiced. Taste blocked progress again in the offices of financial institutions which declined to lend money on anything in the least unfamiliar. [Taste of course is based on familiarity. The object approved by taste is one which has an aura of familiarity yet the stimulation of a touch of the unexpected. If the unexpected becomes a jolt rather than a touch then the aura is broken and taste is offended. This applies to all taste. Good Taste is simply the kind of taste possessed by good people - that is the people held to be good in relation to any particular subject by most other people.]

But there are many kinds of taste. Some are not related to style, or to any art at all. There is a taste for green nature, for instance. In some people this is so strong that it overrides practical and economic considerations. If proof that taste has changed is necessary, consider the north & south sides of our river. When Alexandra Avenue was built the traffic problem was not as great as today; but they had most other difficulties similar to our own. The road-making problem on each side of the river was not very different. Previous generations conceived Alexandra Avenue as an avenue, like a drive to a castle, through a park by a riverbank. Our "Freeway" is conceived by our generation as a concrete ribbon, bald and bold, striking out from the city to such busy office workers to their distant homes — or rather to another knot of traffic about a mile further on. This poor man's freeway is a fine thing at the start where it humps over Hoddle Street, but then it grows ^{out} over the river, destroying for decades the possibility of developing the north bank. ① No money, of course, to do what everyone I knew was necessary — to compensate owners on the far side and push the road back free of the river. And so, as we all know, Melbourne will continue its uninspiring uphill struggle to avoid traffic strangulation at the expense of riverside, bay-side, and parkland. This is an economic and a planning question, of course; but it is also a question of taste. For if the taste of Melbourne still ran to avenues and if water was considered anything more than a surface for water-skiing on, then we would soon find ways of overcoming the difficulties as they did last century.

LIGHTS

My point is that taste is not just something sold behind the plate glass of Mr. Reg Riddell's shop. It's a very important element in the growth of our society. In social behaviour good taste is a negative quality; it means giving no offense. If

that were all it meant in design there would never be any need to seek beyond grey velvet & pastel tints. But in any art good taste means more. It implies a certain knowledge of & sensitivity to what the artists are trying to do. Visual taste at any time, is a thermometer of culture, and it works like this:

There are three levels of taste: popular, good & advanced.

Before discussing the taste of any region at any time one must define the level at which one is discussing it. Advanced taste is the ^{somewhat undisciplined} taste at any minute of the creators, the genuine avant-garde in the art one is following. Of course it is difficult to be certain about the genuineness of any avant-garde movement, but eventually time solves that problem. Every now & then the avant garde does produce a genuine development, that is to say a new aesthetic image or vision of some sort. About a generation later this passes to the other two levels of taste. Good taste, that is the taste of cultivated followers of the art, but non-creators, takes what is important and valid in the new development and condenses and synthesises this into a style image. Then for a time this is a yardstick of correct behavior. Anything that conforms to the image demonstrates the good taste of its designer and of the person who buys it.

Popular taste also builds up an image from the material presented by the avant garde creators. But it selects different elements. It takes all the superficial effects, all the ornamental aspects, all the purely visual devices of the new departure and ignores any genuine thought behind these effects. Nowadays of course popular taste ^{develops a will of its own, so sharply is} moulded by the industrial-commercial machinery of the modern world. It is also clear that popular taste affects advanced taste to some extent, so that a circular motion or spiralling

develops.

4.

in architecture

② One simple example of the way taste ^{in architecture} runs has been seen recently in the use of pierced concrete blocks. About 1956 Edward Durrell Stone, a clever American architect, had the task of designing an American embassy at New Delhi. He hit upon the idea of adapting ^{to modern techniques} the dappled shade effects of carved grillework in Eastern building. He designed a single block with a quadrant of a circle held in a square. Four of these together made up a full circle, which could be repeated indefinitely. He wrapped the whole of his building in this grille and made an image so strong that it affected the world's taste for several years. Positive Good Taste applauded & adopted the chiaroscuro effects, the come-and-go, the sense of mystery, after years of bland boxes. That one building helped restore a touch of romance to modern good taste.

③ Meanwhile popular taste also adopted the grille. The perforated block could be reproduced very simply by concrete-block manufacturers. In no time grille blocks of numerous different patterns were available ^{sold sun-drenched} under names like 'The

④ Moroccan & 'the Miami'. And one block manufactured in Melbourne, with a quadrant inside a square, was called, in a nice tribute to the man who began it all, 'the Edystone'. Before long these ^{patterned} blocks had lost any relevance to sunshading or mystery. They were stuck on the face of brick walls

⑤ and used in 'feature panels', in colours contrasting the remainder. They became the greatest menace to civic dignity since the multi-coloured parkbench was invented here in Prashram.

- ⑥ Everyone with any taste at all realises that popular taste, or Admass or Masscult, is, at the present time awful, as always. He also can state pretty clearly what he would like to see. There's no ^{philosophical} mystery about this. The man of taste today knows well that Australia needs badly at this time a Good Taste of her own — not borrowed from America or England or Europe. We have such a taste in one or two branches of

our culture; for instance in painting. The advanced vision of these rebellious modern painters of 25 years ago has become an Australian School and has passed down successfully to the upper middle layer, or Good Taste level. Hence the artistic revolution that has so transformed the mantlepieces of Melbourne, and the diet of our artists.

- ⑦ I think there can be no one who cares for the look of this country who would not like to see a similarly exciting revolution occur in the streets — in architecture and landscaping and street furniture and advertising and town planning? The questions which sympathetic laymen most frequently ask architects concern the dream of an Australian architecture. Have we our own style? Will we ever? If not, why not?

- ⑧ Well, there was, of course, an Australian architecture of a kind a century ^{or more} ago, and in the country: our colonial homestead style (Holly Green ^{Sunbury}). But no one expects us to return to that. We must begin hunting in the 20th Century.

6

In the early years of the 20th C, before
the Modern Architectural revolution began in Melbourne in 1934.
There were 3 pioneers: Robert Haddon (10) Harold Desbrosse Amner; &
(11) Walter Bury Griffin. These rebels had played a big
part in preparing the ground. But now a movement of advanced
taste began.

(12) It began in such gentle ways as at the Chateau Tabilite homestead
M&G(RG) the traditional Australian country style was barely
adapted but simplified.

(13) In the hospitals of Stephenson & Meldrum (The Mercy, East Melb.) An
Australian functionalist
hospital style developed: clean, fresh, austere and honest.

of architecture.

(14) With all its faults, this kind was epoch making, and in many
countries ^{it prospered.} ~~so~~ it went on to sweep a large part of the globe.

(15) A young firm, ^{Seabrook} S. & F., in 1935 won comp. MGH S. with modern design.
Though there was nothing Australian in the German-born
internationalism of this idiom, these buildings did promise
(16) subtly an Australian kind of building for the first time
freed of direct decorative and stylistic visual leads from
Europe.

(17) Interior of a house at Ranelagh by Roy Grounds.

At this time the only people who commissioned this sort of
work were those who considered themselves a little avant-garde
or those who did not know what they were letting themselves in
for when they chose an architect because ^{perhaps} he went to school with them.

(17A) Exterior of same house. Note: Nothing clever about this; or rather, clever part
was in avoiding being conspicuously clever. Note: this is not same as Contemporary
style which grew out of it.

(18) Then, after 18 long years, this idiom began to filter down from the
avant-garde level.

Conservative architects and conventional owners accepted it. The churches and the banks endorsed it. But all the time, as it found new friends, it was changing.

(19) Perhaps it had to change in order to have any friends in Australia. It became known as "Contemporary". Colour was added in a sprinkly of pure primary tints. Wrought iron, concrete block and pebbles added "interest" to what had been, two decades earlier, proudly plain surfaces. Today ornament of a new kind is back again almost as thick as in Victorian days.

(20) The popular taste today is probably most simply described as the broken-biscuit style. A building is a collection of little bits of all sorts of different flavours as might be collected in a tin by a thrifty, conservative grocer, to be sold cheaply ^{to children}. The collection never becomes a blending of flavours as in goulash, for the individual pieces of different biscuits remain independent. Some with icing, all in oven-crisp shades between oatmeal pinks and brown. Some with jam filling. And then many of the biscuits are literally broken. The next most popular feature block after the perforated grille is the broken-face brick. These poor old bricks are made in the usual way but before they leave the production line they pass through a sort of guillotine that literally breaks off their faces, exposing a nutty crumbly sort interior to the world. What a way to treat a brick! Yet — a major part of the MA 30 yrs ago was the importance of respecting the nature of materials.

To see precisely and disconcertingly how taste has changed, one has only to look at this one-charming centre of gracious designing: around us now: Toorak. This place we saw one or two of the earliest pioneers (22) examples of modern architecture thirty years ago. (4F) It ignored these for at least 20 years. Then suddenly, about five years ago, it discovered the broken biscuit and took to it like a drug. Here was a grotesque spectacle: this stuffy, elegant, conservative lady suddenly deciding to catch up with the modern age in an orgy of cheap, sugared, broken ideas.

May I tell you of a man named Butler, architect of this city — this suburb. Walter Richmond Butler was born in Somerset in 1864. He came to Melbourne and opened practice in 1889, continuing until just before his death in 1949. I doubt if many remember his name now, but at the height of his career in the first two decades of the 20th century he was an influence in this town. He built in Advanced Taste: a solid square Edwardian-Georgian formality with original decorative overtones. In his great house 'Groug Groug' ^{in Toorak Road} of 1912 he introduced Australian motifs, plaster gumleaves on plain pylon porch supports and so on. In 'Melbourne Mansions' at the top of Collins Street, one of Melbourne's first flats, he produced a deeply modelled facade of balconies: one of the most interesting of city buildings before World War II. Both these buildings have gone now, and so have nearly all the rest of his great grey foursquare Toorak houses. This was inevitable. But the poverty of the design work that replaced them, the decline in cultural or taste standards was not inevitable. Walter Butler's thoughtful bldgs have been replaced by particularly undistinguished ^{bldgs} mostly by "yelloweys". (Not my term: 3 storey walk ups in yellow brick built in such profusion throughout South Yarra, Toorak, Hawthorn.)

One has to be careful when laughing at our suburbs. Even though it is hard to think of things bad enough to say about the artistic standard of the yellowey, the social change which the yellowey represents, from servant-operated mansion to multi-storey bachelor-flats is an inevitable and not necessarily retrogressive step. And the same caution must apply, only more so, in one's appraisal of the artistic standard of the larger sprawl of suburbia farther afield.

(24) The Australian suburb is something of a social triumph. We can be proud of the number of separate private houses all owned by happy mortgage companies.

Undoubtedly the endless terra-cotta jungle that creeps out to the Dandenongs and around the Bay shelters many healthy, secure families in conditions physically better than ⁱⁿ most in the world. But also there are (25) many drab, and dull people in bald depressing streets where the paint has rubbed off. When fashion goes there is nothing here, for the suburb grows without plan, without aim beyond growth, without any thought for overall appearance, without proper parks or playing fields, without adequate roads to allow its people to escape from it. The suburb might have suffocated itself ten years ago, like an over-stimulated weed, but for one thing — the good old telly. Television is symbolic of the sort of artificial injection necessary to keep the non-organic, non-community alive. With telly in the livingroom we can allow ourselves to be hogged in the suburb, while our city centre slowly dies as an entertainment or cultural centre, and we escape from Australian reality and endeavour altogether — escape through the little jelly window screen to Hollywood.

The houses of the suburb are made to virtually the same old plan and with the same old materials as were used a hundred years ago, altho' they look different. Here, in conservative stodge overlaid with varied, violent decorative trimmings, is an Australian style of Architecture whether we like it or not.

The almost unique ^{thing} about the Australian suburb is that the economic system permits every owner directly or indirectly to express his own taste in the exterior of the house.

The result of this, as we all know, is the gandiest suburbia in the world: thousands of minor variations on the villa theme, all influenced in some degree by a vulgarisation of that simple austere movement of modern architecture which began 30 yrs ago.

LIGHTS →

[Then the same thing applies with more commercial justification in the shops, turning the shopping districts into riots of wild colours and shapes underneath the advertising. Not many people are pleased with the effect of all this, and most will admit, hypothetically, that the greatest need in the man-made scene is some sense of community, some consolidated vision, some homogeneity. Yet in practice most people, even people with taste, add to the confusion and mess whenever they build, for the quality they dread more ^{than} vulgar profusion is monotony. In fact we could afford to go a long way closer towards a sense of homogenous community without the slightest danger of monotony, if it is ever a danger.

There is no real difficulty in designing good-looking buildings to suit average ^{home or} commercial needs. The difficult part is in keeping the basic thing you design pure — in not permitting yourself to twist it or decorate it or add tricks to make it more interesting to the eye. Yet very few people are prepared to be the first ^{in their street} to be deliberately un-clever, direct and simple. (The first task of an architect, in a reasonably right

and pure world, would be to design his building to harmonize with his surroundings. But today in Australia even sensitive architects ^{when asked to build in the suburbs} propagate the architectural anarchy by making as bold a splash as possible.

(Of course, only one in a thousand houses are done by architects, so the splashes are not very influential.) The architect argues that he cannot harmonize with a cacaphony, therefore he may as well go his own way like everyone else. Very often the one house in a thousand which is done by a thoughtful architect is a genuine and distinguished work which will stand up in any world company when viewed in isolation, but it may not add to the coherence of the suburb.

[Here is perhaps the essence of the aesthetic problem for the architect today. Does he try to do something to tidy up, to recognize the mess of the modern environment and try not to aggravate it when he builds? Does he try to lower the temperature of the restless gaudy race — by building something reticent, quiet and comparatively non-committal? Or does he close his eyes to the mess around his building site and build a thing of beauty, strength and independence, in a vacuum? For instance, what does an architect do when asked, as happens, very rarely, to build in one of those mad gnome's fairylands known as suburban shopping districts. Can he add one more feature to the already-frenzied scene, or should he try to pour the oil of a plain, negative statement on to the troubled ocean of ugliness? Either way he will be criticised by someone: the critic or his client...

27

Now consider a problem from another box of tricks.

Here is ^{example of a} ~~an~~ ^{new} & ^{eminent} ^{successful} subdivision of single-storey home units. It is not far from here & done in what some are pleased to call the Georgian Style, a style which may be in the death throes of commercial exploitation but nevertheless is still amazingly ^{bravely} carrying on. Its adaptation to this sort of 'news' estate is quite a ^{new} thing. Here is a different kettle of fish from the vulgar overcoloured block-girle, broken-biscuit style.

This is acceptable good taste, or virtually. The colours at least are white or palest pastel. The whole set of several separate units pulls together as one. The emasculated period flavour is pure South Yana Style with the Toorak trim.

Now I know that, while I have a receptive audience when I criticise the broken biscuit style I would not make myself at all popular if I were to say anything against this sort of work. I know that many people of much more good taste than I have like this. I would not dream of arguing with them; I would not know where to start. It makes me feel sad and old ~~and tired~~ to think that it should be necessary in the second half of the 20th Century to explain why this sort of stage-scenery is so much in vogue to good materials and good people and our best suburb. What seems to have happened is this: the Advanced Taste of a generation ago has now been successfully vulgarised at the popular level, but on the mid-taste, the Good Taste, level practically

no change at all has occurred. 14

- (28) [One generation ago, in 1934, ^{when} modern architecture and industrial design struggled out of its cocoon, it presented a genuine new vision to pass on to the other levels of taste. This was the vision of the twentieth century, a synthesis of creative art and modern industrial processes. Today, thirty years later, one might be excused for expecting that this vision had penetrated to the second level, the
- (29) level of Good Taste. (I don't mean the details of 1934 — I mean the overall vision of a realistic, spare, appropriate architecture). The superficial effects, the decorative elements and the visual gimmicks have been predictably vulgarised, exploited, commercialised and overdone to death on the popular level of taste. But on the Good Taste level, the level of cultivated people who have helped to encourage a little revolution during the same generation in Australian painting, writing and some other arts, there has been no constructive
- (30) change. Good taste today knows what it doesn't want, but not what it does. Why? In a heroic period of Australian art, why should Australian architecture be struggling for recognition? The simple answer to this is that the ^{mass of} architecture is not good enough to capture cultivated interest. This immediately suggests that the blame rests on the architects. But that is an over-simplification. Architects are only professional men giving advice when ^{Architecture always reflects.} ^{Australian} asked. One ^{house} in a thousand has the professional attention of an architect. That one is often equal to the best in the world: sensitive, original, sophisticated. The A.R. calls Aust. one of the world's 'Growth Points' for creative arch. It is referring not to our bigger buildings, but to houses & a few other small buildings. And each example of this work is not strong enough to counteract 999 others.

In the city, in commercial building, the picture is different. Architects are attached to every new venture and thus, of course, exercise tremendous if not omnipotent power over the appearance of the new city. Happily there has been enough building lately to allow the new buildings in places to form a new environment, a new world, which turns out to be ^{one} of metal and glass boxes.

- (31) Faced with the dilemma already mentioned — whether to add to the inherited mess or to use restraint and negative architecture to calm the restless scene — ^{most} modern Australian architects have chosen restraint. The glass boxes of Queen Street and Circular Quay are built in the image of the UN Secretariat and Mies van der Rohe's ^{Chicago} glass boxes of the 1930s: the end product of the architectural revolution of the first half of the twentieth century. They are done this way not only because the architects who have been asked to build want restraint but because the owners who are building, who chose their architects, also want restraint.
- A great many people do not find the glass city boxes to their taste. They ask our architects impatiently if they can't do something original. Do they have to copy the Americans always? Why is there no Australian architectural style after nearly two centuries? and so on. The people who ask these questions are ^{usually} not the promoters of our bigger buildings. The last thing most promoters want is anything that looks remotely as if it might have an Australian idea in it.
- Frank Lloyd Wright once said that there was nothing as timid as a million dollars. He had never seen £1 m. Aust. The strong tendency at the present time is for the promoters

of our biggest buildings to skip the Australian architect
 — the middleman, as it were — and go straight to
 Americans. 3 or 4 of the biggest building projects in Sydney and
 Melbourne recently completed or planning now are done by a mammoth
 American architectural firm, include huge Qantas hotel in Sydney.
 In short, while we are exporting artists to London we are importing
 architects from California. For instance,
 Two corners at the top of Melbourne's Williams/Bourke Street
 hill will eventually be occupied by buildings conceived in
 America. Fine buildings — polished to the Nth degree, and as
 Australian as our television programmes: ^(or live) These buildings will be
 using Australian money, Australian builders and tradesmen,
 but for the initiating idea: the concept, the Australian promoters apparently
 feel compelled to go back to Hollywood, like on their telly.
 Meanwhile others look to England for guidance. You may have heard
 the suggestion that our permanent Parl. Hse should be designed in England, as NZ has been.
 [I don't expect anyone exc. arch'ts/alarmed at this trend; but it does reflect ^{pop desire for} Aust style.
 There is no hope for Aust ^{Nat} style Too Late — both in Aust. history and in the development
 of the international influences of technology. But this need
 not mean that we are doomed to take all our ideas from
 overseas. We can, and for self respect we must,
 develop our own ideas. These are the only things that
 make us worthwhile as a nation. They are no weaker
 because they are inevitably part of the ideas, the art and
 the levelling science of the whole of modern western civilization.
 We are too much a part of the modern world to be insularly
 Australian. We should not be mournful about our lack
 of an Australian style, an Australian taste. We should, however, be
 considerably exercised about the lack of proper encouragement
 to Australian ideas, the lack of taste for stimulating ideas, the
 contentment with ^{(a) the vulgar mess and} a weak kind of Good Taste, all pale grey velvet & pastel
 tints.